

'We poor idiots in the pew':
Lay and academic uses
of historical-critical methods of biblical
exegesis
in dialogue

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Dedication

To John Beech, who first asked me what I was studying at college,
and to everyone in the pews
who considers interpretation of life and text
and the connections between the two
to be their concern.

May the Spirit of truth guide us into all the truth.

I hereby declare that this thesis constitutes my own research and writing, and has not been submitted in any previous application for a degree. All quotations have been distinguished and the sources of information acknowledged.

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August 2003

Abstract

Historical-critical study of the Gospels, though a recognised area of expertise in ministerial training and a core focus of biblical scholarship, is largely unknown in local churches. The thesis investigates the question whether lay people in local churches might profit from the ability, which theologically trained clergy possess, to use such exegetical methods, in the cause of their own appropriation of the texts.

Scholars with a faith commitment to Christianity typically adopt some combination of the three following styles of biblical hermeneutics: the historical-critical approach, the literary approach and the liberationist approach. While historical-critical scholars privilege the hermeneutical use of history over that of personal experience, literary scholars emphasise the priority of the text's story over that of its interpreters, and liberationists stress the hermeneutical priority of experience. For historical-critical exegesis the hermeneutical use of history appears to be a *sine qua non*, using a perspectival rather than a positivistic understanding of the term 'history'. Such exegesis may be made more accessible in local churches through the complementary use of a hermeneutic of personal experience. Understood as narrative communicated between persons in relation, personal experience can become a vehicle for appropriation of the biblical narratives – a literary approach. Understood as a *locus theologicus*, everyday experience can be a source of revelation in its own right – a liberationist approach.

Combining these uses of history and personal experience in a modified form of the hermeneutical circle – a model of interpretation with antecedents in biblical and pastoral hermeneutics – a model of Bible study labelled community hermeneutics has been trialled in eight Scottish local-church study groups, largely from the Reformed tradition. Analysis of group and interview data according to the social-science approach of grounded theory has produced a threefold typology of group members, labelled Thinker, Relater and Changer respectively, according to their view of the aim of appropriation of the biblical texts. This theory has been validated by triangulation with theories of general and Christian adult education. Analysis of interviewees' hermeneutical uses of both history and personal experience, correlated with the academic approaches named above, highlights how people within each study mode make use of historical-critical exegesis.

The thesis concludes with the proposal that, as well as group leaders' own hermeneutical preferences, successful use of historical-critical exegetical methods in local-church study groups will need to take group members' study modes into account, considering the theological worldview informing their preferred mode of text appropriation. With this element of conditionality, the thesis points to the conclusion that historical-critical exegesis can be profitable for people in local-church study groups in their appropriation of the Gospels.

Acknowledgments

My major debt of gratitude must be to all the people who patiently endured my fieldwork among them, giving generously of their time and attention in Bible study and submitting to my detailed questioning on matters of faith and conduct, as to those who acted as gatekeepers to fieldwork locations. For the purposes of this study they are anonymous, but they know who they are. Thank you.

Many others who can be named have been generous with time and expertise. Dr Michael Northcott introduced me to grounded theory, smoothed the path of ethnographic research for me and has been a constant source of encouragement. Professor Larry Hurtado has asked hard questions, which demanded good answers; Dr Elizabeth Köpping has sensitised me to ministerial power as seen from the pews. Revd John McLuckie and the Edinburgh Contextual Bible Study Group have provided reassurance that other academic biblical interpreters share my concerns. Revd Warren Beattie, Revd Jamie Johns and Revd Misheck Nyirenda have made pertinent comments on my findings, based on a much wider experience of ministry than mine, and Mrs Danielle Plant has been a meticulous proofreader. From the United Reformed Church, which has funded most of my work, Revd Jack Dyce, Principal of the Scottish URC and Congregational College, has continually supported me in connecting church and academic contexts, as have my parents in my determination to climb this scholastic mountain.

Ms Elizabeth South, Ms Wendy White and Ms Doreen Wright have also seen me through my three-year struggle, academic and personal. And without Miss Margaret Acton's generous provision of strong coffee and light reading material, this thesis might have been finished sooner, but only at the risk of a nervous breakdown on my part. My thanks go to all of you.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgments	v
List of abbreviations	vii
List of diagrams	vii
List of tables	vii
Preface	viii
Part 1: Theory	
1. The problem stated: can lay interpreters profit from historical-critical study methods?	9
2. The tools tested: how can 'history' and 'experience' be hermeneutically helpful?	47
3. The model constructed: community hermeneutics justified as a method of Bible study	84
Part 2: Practice	
4. Theory into practice: methodology justified and fieldwork described	112
5. The Thinker: Bible study for ideas	136
6. The Relater: Bible study for values	169
7. The Changer: Bible study for action	208
8. Validation: how does my theory compare with others in the field?	239
Part 3: Theory and practice in dialogue	
9. The results: lay and academic hermeneutics in dialogue	284
10. The conclusions: some uses of historical-critical methods in local churches	322
Appendix I: Pitfalls of community hermeneutics	332
Appendix II: Study procedure	344
Appendix III: Data analysis	348
Appendix IV: Meditative approaches	354
Bibliography	355

List of abbreviations

CBS: Contextual Bible study

C of S: Church of Scotland

N4: NUD*IST 4 qualitative data analysis computer program

URC: United Reformed Church

List of diagrams

Fig. 1: Gadamer's hermeneutical circle	87
Fig. 2: Ricoeur's hermeneutical circle	100
Fig. 3: Freire's hermeneutical circle	104
Fig. 4: The hermeneutical circle of community hermeneutics	111
Fig. 5: Biblical interpretation in local-church group study	133
Fig. 6: Thinker	136
Fig. 7: Relater	169
Fig. 8: Changer	208

List of tables

Table A: Demographic details of individual group members interviewed	348-49
Table B: Demographic analysis of groups observed	350
Table C: Breakdown of citation usage by interviewee	351
Table D: Breakdown of appropriative mode chosen by interpretative move	352-53

Preface

NG: It's sometimes assumed in churches that we poor idiots in the pew are incapable of doing comparative Bible study, and that we have to be told the stories and have the history explained, but that's it, full stop, and you accept and be done with it. Whereas I think it must be more than obvious that in a city like Scotchester there are many, many educated people who take a... really live interest in theology... that any new method which is going to be enlightening is going to be very welcome.

As an ordinand I came to historical-critical study of the Bible from a local-church background, knowing fellow members of church Bible study groups who used their own experiences in studying the texts to be capable interpreters, and unsure of the devotional use of academic approaches. Three years in the Academy, practising historical-critical methods, nearly socialised me into believing that biblical interpretation was an arcane skill for which a baptism of academic ink was indispensable. The last three years, by contrast, have convinced me that dialogue between lay and academic biblical interpreters can be valuable for both parties. As NG's testimony eloquently demonstrates, those who sit in the pews are not idiots. They read their newspapers: the rhetoric and the story behind it. Given tools and permission to exercise thought and imagination on the Gospel texts, they discover that textual differences which previously seemed a stumbling block to faith help bring the texts and those who generated them to life, stimulating thought, values and action. Insights from the pews can also become a resource for the Academy, newly aware of the community dimension of biblical interpretation. Yet for this dialogue to flourish, some responsibility for textual interpretation must be relinquished by those in authority in Church and Academy, and accepted by those in the pews. Such shifts are never easy: for now, the dialogue is a tentative one.

1. The problem stated: can lay interpreters profit from historical-critical study methods?

This chapter introduces the problem with which my thesis originated: the disparity between academic historical-critical biblical exegesis and local-church devotional use of the Bible, due in part to the reluctance of academically trained church leaders to share their knowledge with their congregations. It also puts it into a wider context, both theoretical and practical. The literature is surveyed to appraise the strengths and drawbacks of three hermeneutical methodologies used by New Testament scholars with an overt faith commitment – historical-critical, literary and liberationist – and the extent to which each uses history and personal experience as complementary hermeneutical tools. Practical models of Bible study based on each methodology are also surveyed, focussing on the extent to which expertise is shared within them. The paucity of dialogue between academic and lay biblical interpretation is noted, to be addressed by my research proposal: the practical trial in local-church study groups of a model for Bible study, to be called community hermeneutics, using both history and experience. From this fieldwork a grounded theory of lay biblical interpretation within the local church will be constructed and brought into dialogue with the academic hermeneutical methodologies surveyed.

The question

I first encountered this problem on a practical level as a student in ministerial education, still attending the local United Reformed Church (URC) congregation from which my call to the ministry had been approved. Members of the congregation

‘We poor idiots in the pew’

would ask me what I was learning in college. Wanting to share something they knew about, I would reply that I was studying the Bible. What had I found out? Here I was faced with a difficulty. Historical-critical approaches to study of the Bible – the mainstream hermeneutical approach where I was studying – seemed remote from the lives of people in my congregation. If I could give them a date at which a biblical book was written – a date, moreover, likely to be disputed in academic circles – what use would it be in their devotional lives? I had not found it a resource for my own faith. The same applied to authorship. Questions of genre or redaction would involve lecturing my unfortunate interlocutor for half an hour to unravel what I meant, leaving them with the impression either that nothing of use was taught in academic theology or that I was losing my faith. The safest thing was to smile sweetly and say I was studying the Bible in great detail. That usually stopped them asking again.

Other church leaders have taken the same way out, as James D. Smart reports in a telling episode recounted in *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*. Uproar was generated when a North American church decided to update its church school curriculum to include such themes as the presence of two creation stories in Genesis, treated other than as matters of historical fact.

In one village three men, prominent in the local church, were standing in the street reviewing the situation with some concern when a retired minister, who had been their pastor many years before, joined them. They told him what they were discussing and received from him the assurance that there was nothing really new or disturbing in the approach of the curriculum to the Bible. ‘We had it all in seminary fifty years ago,’ he said, to which the immediate retort of one of the men was, ‘Then why in hell didn’t you tell us about it?’ (Smart 1970, 69).

The background

There are reasons why ministers might wish to keep the conclusions of historical criticism from their congregation. To start with, such conclusions challenge traditional formulations of Christian faith. Historical-critical studies of the Bible have suggested, for example, that the religious experience of the early Christians was much less homogenous – and more conflictual – than was previously thought (Wiles 1994, 41). Parts of the biblical tradition have been found to have parallels within other faith communities (von Rad 1972, 4). Such findings challenge traditional understandings of the Bible's unity and its unique witness to God; historical-critical analysis has been inimical to those who hold the Bible as inerrant or verbally inspired. The traditional understanding of the authority of Scripture has also been undermined. Hebrew Bible texts previously regarded as contemporaneous with their subject matter have been reframed as projections into the past, thus removing their authority as witnesses to the events presented as historical within them (for example, the book of Daniel; see Hartman and Di Lella 1990, 406-409). Traditional ascriptions of apostolic (and therefore eyewitness) authorship to the Gospels have been doubted (see for example Sanders and Davies 1989, 14-15). Summarising, critics have concluded not only that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life have been recorded in theological as much as chronological order, but also that multiple layers of confessional material obscure the claims to historicity of the events under discussion.

Overall, conclusions drawn from the historical-critical approach have underlined the gap between the worldviews to be found in the biblical texts, especially those relating to miraculous events, and those of their Christian readers today

(see Nineham 1990, 155-59). Many clergy have considered that gap too wide for their congregations to bridge. Whereof they dare not speak (to parody Wittgenstein), thereof they remain silent, operating out of a modern or postmodern perspective themselves but leaving their congregations in premodernity.

However understandable their fear, it is hard to justify this sin of omission, particularly within the Reformed context, where Bible reading by members of the congregation, as much as by ministers, has traditionally been deemed an essential facet of personal commitment. Yet clerical fear of weakening the faith of the faithful may cover a less reputable qualm. If such church leaders consider the conclusions of historical criticism too dangerous for their congregations to handle, how much more the methods of historical-critical study, promulgation of which might encourage their congregations to dispute their own authority! As Francis Bacon first stated, knowledge is power: in a world where clerical authority is on the wane but professionalism on the increase, the attraction of retaining theological expertise within clerical ranks is evident.

Yet not all readers trained in academic theology have given up the struggle to communicate the Gospels to local-church members across the gulf of history. David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham, is one famous, or infamous, example of the attempt. Jenkins came to his bishopric from an academic theological background. After his enthronement he continued to speak from that viewpoint, to a much wider audience. His aim (Jenkins and Jenkins 1991, 7) was to reconcile the critical use of the Bible with orthodox faith, by the substitution of a metaphorical and symbolic understanding of the Gospels – including pivotal events, such as the

Virgin Birth and the Resurrection – for a historical one. The reaction was enormous, with over a thousand letters being sent to him after each focal point of media coverage. Jenkins reports that, 'Even at the height of the most hostile press coverage the ratio never fell below three letters of support to every two letters of protest' (Jenkins and Jenkins 1991, 3). Yet this still considerable level of protest was unleashed upon him for saying in public what academic theologians had been saying in lectures and books for over a century.

Jenkins himself deplores the idea of Christianity as 'a matter of handing over packages of information with instructions about their application' (Jenkins and Jenkins 1991, 25). The effect of his attempt at honest communication, however – especially as misreported by the media – appears to have been the substitution of packages of conservative, traditional information on Christianity with equally indigestible packages of liberal, academic information.

The sermon or lecture is tailor-made for this form of education, but it is not the only form. In the context of small-group Bible study, this work will offer an alternative model of interpretation I shall call 'community hermeneutics', training in historical critical methods by sharing interpretative responsibility within the whole group rather than arrogating it to the leader alone, for theoretical justification and practical trialling. However, Jenkins' definition of being properly and usefully theological – the attempt to interact between two perspectives, 'one coming from practical human perceptions of present reality and one coming from an insight of faith and revelation' (Jenkins and Jenkins 1991, 169) – is one that I will follow.

My thematic emphasis, then, taken from the question which sparked off my interest in the topic, is on the potential of using historical-critical methods of studying the Bible in local-church study groups. I shall specifically concentrate on the Gospels, since these books are a major focus of local-church interpretation. This will be framed in the wider context of a grounded theory describing ways in which biblical interpreters in local-church study groups appropriate the texts, constructed from fieldwork data collected using the study method of community hermeneutics.

Academic biblical hermeneutics

Are there any precedents for this in the literature? For historical-critical study of the Bible the use of history seems necessary, and the three major academic hermeneutical approaches using, in varying degrees, a historical approach to the Bible are historical criticism, literary criticism and liberation theology. The *historical-critical* approach itself naturally stresses the theme of history, concerning itself with authorship and dating of the biblical books, the sources of which they are composed, and the historical contexts both of the texts' original formation and their redactors' compilation. The *literary* approach, in reaction to historical criticism, uses an overtly theological hermeneutic, sometimes within the context of church tradition, and also draws on the concept of narrative as a foundational aspect of human experience. The *liberationist* approach, while using history as the arena for God's saving acts as its theological background, stresses the role of the church community in interpretation. This is understood as the grassroots community of the oppressed rather than as the ecclesiastical institution, so the experience of the oppressed and the necessity for liberative praxis are its primary hermeneutical strategies. Each of these

approaches has both strengths and drawbacks, in comparison with one another and in the degree of their links with local church communities. These will be explored through a literature survey of scholars in each field who have written on the hermeneutical issues involved.

Of course, these divisions between hermeneutical methodologies are somewhat artificial. So-called 'historical' approaches make use of literary concepts such as genre and try to reconstruct the experiences of the first Christian communities.

Literary approaches work with the tradition arising from the historical experiences of generations of Christians. Liberationist approaches, using salvation history as a framework, also use narrative to make parallels between the authenticity of personal experience and the historicity of biblical material. Moreover, some scholars demonstrate a combination of approaches. Given that my research is situated in a church context, this survey will concentrate on those scholars of the New Testament with an overt Christian faith commitment, to the exclusion of those coming from other perspectives.

Historical-critical approaches

'The historical critical approach' actually covers a wide range of methods, developed over centuries to study different aspects of the Bible. This is clearly expounded in

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, a recent document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission (The Pontifical Biblical Commission 1995, 16-17):

The text is... submitted to a linguistic (morphology and syntax) and semantic analysis, using the knowledge derived from historical philology... The existence of doublets, of irreconcilable differences and of other indicators is a clue to the composite character of certain texts. These can then be divided into small units, the next step being to see whether these in turn can be assigned to different sources.

Genre [form] criticism seeks to identify literary genres, the social milieu that gave rise to them, their particular features and the history of their development... Finally, redaction criticism studies the modifications that these texts have undergone before being fixed in their final state; it also analyses this final stage, trying as far as possible to identify the tendencies particularly characteristic of this concluding process.

A briefer explanation, more specific to criticism of the Gospels, runs as follows:

'Source criticism' is the effort to find the earliest gospel, or sources now lost but used by one or more of them. 'Form criticism' is the analysis of individual passages (called 'pericopes'), to determine their origin, development and use. 'Redaction criticism' is the study of the theology and compositional habits of the evangelists (Sanders and Davies 1989, 46-47).

A critical and historical approach to the biblical texts is, of course, not an Enlightenment novelty (see for example Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* (Augustine 1996). Modern historical criticism, however, is based upon a positivistic understanding of history as a science, developed through the Enlightenment, affecting not only our understanding of the biblical texts as historical documents but also their claims to historical referentiality. It uses principles formulated by Ernst Troeltsch, who enumerated three major principles of historical research: criticism, analogy and correlation. *Criticism* means that judgements about the past cannot be classified as true or false, but merely have a greater or lesser degree of probability. *Analogy* means that events in the past cannot be unique, but must bear some analogical relationship with events within our own experience. *Correlation* means that there is a strict sequence of cause and effect without which no event in time and space can occur.

Troeltsch himself believed 'that these principles were incompatible with traditional Christian belief and, therefore, that anyone who based his historical inquiries upon them should necessarily arrive at results which an orthodox Christian would consider

negative and skeptical' (Harvey 1967, 15). Interestingly, Troeltsch also enumerated a fourth principle of subjectivity, that a consensus on correct interpretation could be based on the essential uniformity of human nature (Troeltsch 1991, 25), an approach which finds resonances in my fieldwork (see Chapters 5 and 6 below).

In spite of the theological difficulties implicit in the acceptance of Troeltsch's philosophical framework, historical-critical methods have been and still are used by scholars with Christian commitments. Gerhard Ebeling, for instance, saw the historical-critical approach as the quintessentially Protestant way of scriptural interpretation, defined over against his understanding of Catholic hermeneutics as actualising the revelation of God by means of intermediates rather than through Christ alone. The historical gap between the world of the texts then and that of their readers now was a theological advantage, because it removed the docetic possibility of pretending that God's revelation could be found other than through the ambiguities of history (Ebeling 1963, 56-57). Similarly, Käsemann argued (see Krentz 1975, 75) that the refusal to ask questions about the inconsistencies evident within the biblical texts does not take seriously the historicity of the circumstances both of their writing and of the subsequent formation of the canon.

Yet the Christian scholar who uses historical-critical methods stands between the Scylla of fundamentalist biblical inerrancy, which refuses to admit discontinuity in the texts, and the Charybdis of radical doubt, which allows for no continuity between Jesus and the first Christian communities. Such contemporary scholars as the members of the Jesus Seminar (see, for example, Funk et al. 1993) follow the nineteenth-century liberal Christian tradition of trying to distinguish between the

valuable 'kernel' of authentic 'historical Jesus' tradition and the disposable 'husk' of subsequent theological accretions, portraying the dogmatic 'Christ of faith'. As Albert Schweitzer (Schweitzer 1954) showed of those earlier attempts, the results tend to display the preoccupations of the researcher as much as the authentic characteristics of Jesus. Moreover, such an attempt to separate historical and faith understandings is premised on a false dichotomy, since the Gospels were all written by Christian believers in the light of faith in the risen Jesus (see Schneiders 1999, xxi-xxvii). It is arguably more consonant with the Gospels' origins to acknowledge each stage of their historical development, from the words and deeds of Jesus to the historical situation of the first Christian communities to the theological preoccupations of the Gospel redactors, as significant for faith.

According to the Roman Catholic New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, all these meanings can come under the umbrella of the 'literal sense' of the Gospels. This multiple view of the literal sense allows theological validity to textual elements other than those layers disclosed as the oldest: 'what Jesus meant when he did or said something' (Brown 1981, 30). Brown values this understanding of the literal sense, not as the only possible range of meanings for the text in question, but for its moderating influence upon further meanings developed over the course of time. Thus the approach supplies 'a conscience and a control' (Brown 1981, 33) to biblical interpretation; this is particularly relevant for Roman Catholicism, where the postbiblical development of tradition plays so large a role in the church's self-understanding.

Others, however, have expressed doubts as to the theological usefulness of the historical-critical approach. After all, the scientific view of history implied by Troeltsch's rules excludes the possibility of taking unique events, or those not paralleled in current experience, as historically referential, and hence makes the revelation of God impossible to discern historically. Rather than rejecting the approach altogether, however, different strategies have been developed to circumvent this difficulty. Peter Stuhlmacher, for example, has tried to 'customise' Troeltsch's principles by adding the principle of attentiveness (*Vernehmen*), which, he argues, is already practised in historical studies, as part of an overall strategy which he names the hermeneutic of agreement (*Einverständnis*). Though he does not make it completely clear how *Vernehmen* is to be operated in practice, its results are evidently desirable in his eyes:

By means of this supplementary principle [of *Vernehmen*] we will win back the possibility of discovering within history new events which have no analogy, of recognising the value of the historical meaning of social communities as well as great religious individuals, and of correcting and widening the scope of familiar patterns of correlation through new insights [my translation] (Stuhlmacher 1979a, 220).

Stuhlmacher sees the historical-critical approach as the only possible way forward for biblical interpretation. However, though he views it as an ideal tool to encounter the biblical texts and their world, it cannot be a law unto itself, for such partial interpretation can disclose part only of the reality of the text. Instead, he claims that such interpretations must be tested in the 'praxis of faith': personal and communal Bible study, preaching and Christian living. This testing of hermeneutics by praxis will be taken up again in the liberationist hermeneutical paradigm (see below). The uncritical nature of Stuhlmacher's *Vernehmen*, however, reminiscent of Gadamer's

use of tradition (for more on this see Chapter 3), overlooks questions raised by a hermeneutic of suspicion, another vital feature of the liberationist approach.

In *The End of the Historical Critical Method*, Gerhard Maier goes further, condemning the historical-critical approach in round terms as the Babylonian captivity of the church. Maier rejects Troeltsch's principle of analogy which, as Stuhlmacher also saw, removed the possibility of genuine novelty and hence of transcendence from history. His reminder that revelation in the Christian sense is personal rather than solely factual (and hence cannot be amenable to purely 'objective' methods of study) is also apt. Moreover, his point regarding the frequently inadequate translation of historical-critical work into the church context is the crux of this whole project. However, the 'historical-Biblical' method with which Maier replaces the historical-critical method (Maier 1974, 80-88) bears considerable resemblance to the object of his scorn.

Walter Wink has also rejected the historical-critical paradigm, famously declaring it bankrupt with respect to the original aims of its Christian practitioners:

It is bankrupt solely because it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illuminates our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation (Wink 1973, 2).

Wink's criticism of its framework is wholesale: 'It was based on an inadequate method, married to a false objectivism, subjected to uncontrolled technologism, separated from a vital community, and has outlived its usefulness as presently practiced' (Wink 1973, 15). Yet it is not so much the methods of historical criticism as the underlying Troeltschian paradigm of history which he rejects. Wink parallels 'functional atheism', which he diagnoses in believing biblical scholars who practise

'scientific' historical criticism, with human self-alienation. Accordingly, he seeks to heal these splits by a synthesis of historical-critical and psychoanalytic methods, taking account of the context of the exegete, as well as of the text and its historical situation.

It may be seen from this discussion that historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation are valuable in avoiding a docetic treatment of the texts, highlighting the ambiguities of history and the cultural gap between the texts and their interpreters. Yet the underlying 'scientific' paradigm of history, by means of which such approaches have been developed, is both theoretically inadequate to appraise the Christian claim that God is revealed in history and suspect in its vaunted neutrality, since its results are inevitably influenced by its interpreters' contexts. If the historical development of the texts, bearing witness to historical events 'behind the texts' (Gerald West's helpful term, see below and Chapter 10), is to remain useful in biblical interpretation, a new paradigm of history, giving greater weight to the context of interpreters as well as texts, is necessary.

Yet is the historical-critical tool of biblical interpretation necessary at all? Another group of interpreters, whose work is to be classified under the umbrella heading of 'literary approaches', has reacted to the quandary facing believing biblical scholars in a different way: by concentrating on the final form, rather than the historical development, of the biblical texts.

Literary approaches

These provide a more recent hermeneutical alternative within the Academy to those aspects of historical-critical scholarship attacked by Wink and others. Though such

scholars do not form a formal school of thought based on a common theory or set of practices, their approaches rely more on literary than on historical methodologies, and narrative is frequently significant. However, in spite of the reaction against their historical-critical predecessors, the question of history is not ignored in these approaches, though such interpreters' interest in historical events 'behind the text' varies considerably, as does their view of the role of the church community in biblical interpretation.

The canonical hermeneutic of Brevard Childs is uneasily located within this grouping. Childs links the biblical texts in their final, canonical form to the church communities which acknowledge them as scripture today. By 'canonical' he means the reception and acknowledgment of certain religious traditions as authoritative writings within a faith community... the process by which the collection arose... the theological forces at work in its composition (Childs 1992, 70).

However, he distrusts both the commonplace literary appeal to narrative as a foundational category of human experience and literary approaches' frequent treatment of the Bible as the church's book, which has 'rendered it subservient to countless ideologies and severely domesticated its authority' (Childs 1992, 723).

The main criticism of Childs' canonical approach, however, articulated by Francis Watson (Watson 1994, 43), is that appeal to the canon (and *which* particular canon he never specifies) alone cannot decide without appeal to historical and ecclesiastical context how scripture is to interpret scripture.

Moving on to the narrativists whom Childs criticises, in *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, George Stroup links contemporary Christian identity in the community of the church with the Christian story, told through both Bible and liturgy:

A person is a member of a community only when he or she re-members with the other members, only when the community's common narrative and the past it preserves are appropriated and extended into the future, both the future of the community and that of the individual...

The core of Scripture is a set of narratives which serve as the common denominator for the whole of Scripture. These narratives vary in form and content but each of them functions as an explanation for what Israel and the church believe and why they live the way they do (Stroup 1984, 133, 136).

Uninterested in history 'behind the texts', literary scholars differ in their valorisation of the historical referentiality of the texts themselves. Stroup himself considers that the historical nature of the events to which the texts refer is significant in consideration of the truth claims of the Gospels:

If it could be demonstrated conclusively that Jesus of Nazareth did not die on a cross in Jerusalem but died of old age in Galilee, then the core claims of Christian faith, such as those in Acts 10:34-43, would no longer be true. They might be true symbolically as statements about what is noble and meaningful in human behavior, but that is a different kind of truth claim than that made by the text in its final form (Stroup 1984, 137-38).

Hans Frei, on the other hand, is a narrative theologian for whom history 'behind the text' is not on the agenda at all. Like other narrative theologians, he uses the pre-modern technique of figuration or typological reading – the idea that biblical stories echo and explain each other – to decipher the texts' meaning. This coding is generally worked out christologically by narrativists, as Frei demonstrates here:

The Jewish texts are taken as 'types' of the story of Jesus as their common 'antitype', an appropriating procedure that begins in the New Testament, notably in the letters of Paul, the letter to the Hebrews, and the synoptic Gospels, and then becomes the common characteristic of the Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation until modern times (Frei 1993, 120).

Following Karl Barth's understanding of the apparently historical Gospel texts as 'saga', Frei brackets the question of history by labelling the texts 'history-like' (my emphasis), categorising their reality as textual rather than extra-textual. Like a realistic novel, Frei contends, the biblical texts cannot be reduced to subject matter,

an author's intention or any other 'behind the text' consideration. Following Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (Auerbach 1953), he argues that, unlike a realistic novel, the extra-biblical world must be incorporated into the text and not vice versa: we must make sense of our lives with reference to Jesus' life.

This is also the approach of George Lindbeck, who sees Christian doctrines as grammatical rather than propositional statements, which therefore determine the rules by which, within the Christian context, one construes experience and understanding:

Some doctrines, such as those delimiting the canon and specifying the relation of Scripture and tradition, help determine the vocabulary; while others (or sometimes the same ones) instantiate syntactical rules that guide the use of this material in construing the world, community, and self, and still others provide semantic reference (Lindbeck 1984, 81).

Operating on this dynamic, like Frei Lindbeck has relatively little interest in extra-textual historical reality, since

[j]ust as grammar by itself affirms nothing either true or false regarding the world in which language is used, but only about language, so theology and doctrine, to the extent that they are second-order activities, assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions (Lindbeck 1984, 69).

Another narrativist, Stephen Fowl, has a slightly more positive but still ambivalent relationship with the historical-critical approach to the Bible, describing his eclectic use of its conclusions (characteristic of literary approaches) as 'plundering the Egyptians' (Fowl 1998, 179-90). In *Engaging Scripture*, Fowl argues for an underdetermined theory of biblical interpretation, looking neither for a scientifically determined 'right answer' to which every interpretation must approximate, as the

classical historical-critical approach suggests, nor for the plethora of interpretations, endlessly deferring meaning, generated by postmodern hermeneutics.

Fowl counters the liberationist argument (see below) that texts should be interrogated to reveal their inherent ideological biases, by arguing that not texts themselves but rather interpreters of texts have ideologies. Rather than urging a specific, determinist hermeneutical strategy for the avoidance of sinful misinterpretation, therefore, he urges the necessity of vigilant Christian communities – who take seriously the practices of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation – reading the biblical texts single-mindedly with their eye on Jesus. And though he recommends only an 'ad hoc' usage of historical-critical scholarship by Christian communities, he sees the quality of *phronesis*, practical wisdom, demonstrated by the scholarly community in forming and testing their arguments, as modelling the character formation necessary for reading biblical texts within the church (Fowl 1998, 187-90).

Francis Watson has a more optimistic view of a positive relationship between narrative theology and the biblical texts understood historically, though this is not immediately apparent in his writings. In *Church, Text, World* Watson queries the adequacy of the classical historical-critical paradigm because of the plurality of conclusions drawn from historical-critical treatment of the biblical texts, rendering vain the hope of any firm historical knowledge of their extra-textual referents (Watson 1994, 58-9). Though, like both Stroup and Ebeling, he allows the necessity of a historical understanding of the Bible to guard against biblicism (Watson 1994, 228), *Church, Text, World* defines the primary genre of the Gospels not as history but rather as holy scripture. Like Stroup and Fowl, Watson also argues that the church –

understood as a worshipping body – is the primary interpretative community for the biblical texts:

When the community gathers for worship, these texts (above all, the gospels) are read and reread in the expectation that, when heard within this liturgical and sacramental context and interpreted through the medium of preaching, they will serve to clarify and to reinforce the community's beliefs, values and practices and assist its members to respond appropriately to the challenges of a world which generally operates on the basis of very different beliefs, values and practices (Watson 1994, 227).

Orienting himself with pre-modern interpreters such as Origen and Reformers such as Calvin, in *Church, Text, World* Watson holds that the discrepancies and implausibilities exposed by historical-critical methods are not a major issue for belief:

For the unbeliever, these [non-historical] elements [in the narrative] disclose the untruthfulness of the whole. For the believer, they are irreducible, indispensable ways of speaking about the divine-human history, and since interpretation is oriented towards the text in its canonical form, it is often unnecessary to decide whether and how far events occurred as narrated (Watson 1994, 230-31).

In *Text and Truth*, however, his understanding of the texts has developed to allow more weight to history as a category for interpreting the Gospels (Watson 1997, 33).

Here Watson takes up Gadamer's idea of a work of art recognised by succeeding generations as 'classic' (Gadamer 1979, 254ff, extended by Tracy 1981, 248f to include the 'historic' – historically significant – Christ-event). Accordingly, Watson suggests that this historic event has been transmitted into the present by the Gospels' *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Watson 1997, 49-52): Gadamer's term for their constant reinterpretation by every generation of believers (Gadamer 1979, 300f). Watson's classification of the Christ-event as historic has theological implications for considering the Gospels as written history (Watson 1997, 52-53). Such a classification is valid only in retrospect, and therefore depends on the development of

Gospel tradition. For its validity, the Christ-event must also possess transcendent and not merely immanent grounding. This is based on its nature, demonstrated through its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, as a single event, past, present and future: 'As history-writing, the gospels are books about the past; as the writing of that which is historic, they are books about their own present and future, which are the present and future of this past' (Watson 1997, 53). This status demands a stability which the Gospels, as written texts in a literate culture, can secure.

Watson's argument makes use of Gadamer's positive reappraisal of church tradition (see Chapter 3). However, taken on its own, Gadamer's stress on tradition could falsely 'seem to appeal to a communally-authoritative location in order to protect the gospels from the critical questioning that is carried on elsewhere' (Watson 1997, 50-51) – a point already made by Childs. To counter this danger, Watson draws on the work of Paul Ricoeur (see also below Chapter 3) to make room again for critical examination of the Gospels as historiography – written history.

Using the historian William Dray as his guide, Ricoeur rejects the univocally causative historical explanations of Troeltsch's ideal, the all-seeing scientifically trained historian, in favour of the heterogeneous causal explanations which are now accepted within the discipline of historiography (Watson 1997, 59). *Pace* Troeltsch, God's transcendent action can no longer be ruled out *ipso facto* as one causal factor within a historiographical account.

In compiling such an account, like the writer of fictional narratives, 'The historian must share the novelist's ability to make a story followable, plausible and acceptable' (Watson 1997, 59). However, in the case of the Gospels there is no guarantee that

such a strategy will be successful for everyone, any more than a psychoanalytical 'take' on the writing of a biography would be meaningful for every reader:

A historical explanation may facilitate the followability and plausibility of the story for some but hinder it for others, for whom it seems to raise greater problems than the problem it attempts to solve... When, for example, Matthew tells of the opening of the tombs and the resurrection of the saints at the moment of Jesus' death (Matt. 27.52-53), it is not obvious how this narrated event could be a reconstruction of 'what one day was "real"' (Watson 1997, 60, 61, quoting Ricoeur 1988, 100).

To counter this difficulty, Watson uses Ricoeur's concept of 'the fictionalizing of history' (see also Chapter 2). Ricoeur's understanding of the Gospels, where fictive elements within a primarily referential text enhance rather than undercut the historic quality of the Christ-event, Watson calls 'narrated history' (Watson 1997, 54). He understands this reality to be mediated primarily through the texts, but within the context of the believing community and its praxis, and that of the Spirit moving in the world and in the church.

Though like Fowl Watson stresses the interpretative role of the believing community, unlike Fowl he does not reject the possibility that sinful ideologies – in the instance he uses, the biblical androcentrism discerned by feminist criticism (Watson 1994, 155-219) – are to be found within the biblical texts. Accordingly, he uses a Lutheran dichotomy of law and gospel to allow criticism of the canonical texts from within the Christian community.

Initially these literary approaches to the biblical texts appear to cut the Gordian knot of historical criticism. Through appeal to the narrative nature of human experience they can draw the believing reader into the stories of Jesus. The gap of history is bridged by tradition passed down through generations within the worshipping community of the church – the context, after all, in which the Gospels were

originally formed. However, within literary approaches to the Bible, from Stroup's insistence on the historical claims of the texts to Frei's bracketing of the question, no consensus has been reached on the extent to which historical referentiality of the Gospels is still significant. Moreover, the literary strategy of ignoring real textual discrepancies enables the tradition to be co-opted by ecclesiastical powers, emphasising their version of the story as the only possible version. Other versions, however, will not be silenced, as the variety of liberationist approaches to interpretation of the Gospels demonstrates.

Liberationist approaches

The biblical theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, expressed in *A Theology of Liberation*, holds that the eschatological history of God with humanity, to which the Bible witnesses through creation, through the Exodus event and through the work of Christ, will be completed by the whole of human history (Gutiérrez 1974, 153-68). He emphasises the historical significance of the incarnation for all human life: 'Since God has become man, humanity, every man, history, is the living temple of God. The "pro-fane," that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists' (Gutiérrez 1974, 194). Thus the coming of God's kingdom may be seen not only in the Gospels but also in the historical and contemporary struggle for human liberation (Gutiérrez 1974, 177).

Other Latin American liberationist academics such as Clodovis Boff (see below) have focussed to a greater extent than has Gutiérrez on methodological issues of hermeneutics. Yet the hermeneutical distinctiveness of liberationist biblical interpretation has also been driven by groups of local Christians discussing the Bible

through the lens of their own life experience. This hermeneutical model arises from the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, developed techniques of dialogical education, in the process of teaching peasants to read and write, using the experiences of their everyday lives as fit topics for discussion. The technique was taken up by priests, monks and nuns working with church groups studying the Bible in Latin America. One record of such interpretation, compiled at Solentiname in Nicaragua, has been put together by Ernesto Cardenal under the title of *Love in Practice* (Cardenal 1977).

Simplistically, in liberationist interpretation both the biblical texts and the personal experience of believers are interpreted as witnessing to God's acts in history, challenging both positivistic and narrative understandings. Yet Boff casts doubt on the unsophisticated liberationist paradigm, described by him as the 'correspondence of terms' model, in which each aspect of the situation described in a biblical text should be paralleled directly with current events (for example, cross of Jesus = political assassination of freedom fighter). He emphasises the distinctiveness of Jesus' situation, compared with that obtaining in Latin America today. Instead, Boff suggests a 'correspondence of relationships' model, in which context is taken into account both for the biblical texts and for current interpretative communities.

Drawing on the *Sitz im Leben* approach of form criticism, Boff uses the argument – similar to Brown's 'literal sense' – that some Gospel stories were created by the early Christians after Jesus' death, in response to new developments within their community context, in a spirit of 'creative fidelity' to his words and actions (Boff 1991, 28). Using the multiple layers of the text uncovered by the

historical-critical process, Boff parallels the *relationships* between Jesus and his context; between the early church and its context; between church tradition and the historical context; between our own political actions and our context. This gives a way to make scripture relevant in our situations, as we perform our own acts of 'creative fidelity':

We need not, then, look for formulas to 'copy,' or techniques to 'apply,' from scripture. What scripture will offer us are rather something like orientations, models, types, directives, principles, inspirations – elements permitting us to acquire, on our own initiative, a 'hermeneutic competency,' and thus the capacity to judge – on our own initiative, in our own right – 'according to the mind of Christ,' or 'according to the Spirit,' the new, unpredictable situations within which we are continually confronted (Boff 1991, 30).

Juan Luis Segundo's hermeneutical model offers a higher degree of interpretative flexibility based on contemporary context. In a complete reversal of Fowl's attitude (see above), Segundo sees textual ideology as both universal and potentially positive. Asking the question, 'Is there anything left in scripture once we have discarded the ideological element?' he concludes that '[the] conception of God is never found separated from the ideologies that attempt to interpret God by applying his demands to a specific historical situation' (Segundo 1993, 101).

Based on the necessarily contingent and relative nature of history, Segundo argues for 'the coexistence of faith and ideologies in all levels of the Bible':

Over a period of twenty centuries different faith-inspired encounters took place between human beings and the objective font [sic] of absolute truth. All of these encounters were historical; hence each one of them was relative, bound up with a specific and changing context... Through the process people *learned how to learn* with the help of ideologies (Segundo 1993, 93) [author's emphasis].

He concludes that the separation of faith from ideology is both impossible and inadvisable, since faith 'has sense and meaning only insofar as it serves as the foundation stone for ideologies' (Segundo 1993, 93). The function of these

ideologies is to bridge the hermeneutical gap between 'the conception of God that we receive from our faith' and 'the problems that come to us from an ever-changing history' (Segundo 1993, 99-100). Gadamer's concept of tradition – 'our faith' – has been given a critical appraisal based on the specific problems of believers' concrete historical situation.

This strategy allows Segundo to differentiate between faith in the Bible as the 'objective font of absolute truth' and the adoption within a biblical text of a particular ideology, demanded by a particular set of historical circumstances (for example, the Israelite extermination of enemies). More radically, he also applies this provisionality to Jesus' teaching about freely offered love and non-resistance to evil. This allows him to surmount the apparent problem – for liberation theology – that both Jesus and Paul seem much more interested in liberation in the context of interpersonal relationships than in that of political oppression.

In a hermeneutical move comparable to Boff's use of the correspondence of relationships, Segundo advocates the construction of new ideological responses to new historical situations, rather than the imposition of whichever biblical solution – whether from Exodus or the Gospels – can be made to fit the current context. Here he offers the metaphor of first- and second-level learning: on the one hand learning facts, and on the other learning how to learn. He compares biblical ideologies with first-level learning:

They are responses learned vis-à-vis specific historical situations. Faith, by contrast, is the total process to which man [sic] submits, a process of learning in and through ideologies how to create the ideologies needed to handle new and unforeseen situations in history... fighting one's way out of bondage in Egypt is one experience and turning the other cheek is another experience. Someone who has gone

through both experiences and has reflected on them has learned how to learn (Segundo 1993, 103).

Like Watson, he sees the teacher of new biblical learning as the Holy Spirit, a case argued from John 16:12-14 (Segundo 1993, 103). Such an argument, like Brown's multiple understanding of the 'literal sense' of biblical texts and Gutiérrez' 'creative fidelity', allows relevance and authority to those Gospel texts labelled by historical criticism as reflections of the situation in early Christian communities as well as to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. Indeed, Segundo argues that reading the texts as a series of ideologies is compatible with a historical-critical approach to biblical hermeneutics (Segundo 1993, 100). While the classical historical-critical exegete deliberately refuses to judge between the various ideologies to be found within the Bible, however, Segundo contends that the liberation theologian must weigh up the varying merits of different ideological responses to situations today.

Nevertheless, Boff and Segundo, along with the other Latin American liberation theologians, still regard the biblical texts as *norma normans* (Boff 1991, 30-31), on the basis of which experience is to be understood, rather than vice versa. The possibility that the texts themselves might have oppressive ideologies (see Watson above) is not considered. Though Latin American liberation theology sharply criticised the oppressive political and economic structures of their governments, which oppressed the poor, ecclesiastical oppression was not a major focus (though, ironically, the Roman Catholic hierarchy has silenced some liberation theologians). Other groups who have experienced oppression within church and society (women, African and Asian Christians, gay men and lesbians, disabled people) have also developed liberation theologies. These, however, criticise not only traditional

interpretations of the Bible but the oppressive bias of the texts themselves as experienced by such groups.

In these latter liberation theologies the two Latin American categories of interpreters – academic and grassroots – are collapsed into one, as academics from particular groups reflect on their own experiences of injustice. Feminist theology is one of the most sophisticated of these forms. Such interpreters as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have developed complex batteries of hermeneutical tactics in relation to the biblical texts; here historical-critical methods are used as one tool of liberation among many. The paradigm of history behind such approaches is very different both from the problematic idea of history as objective science and from the relativity of some postmodern approaches, as Schüssler Fiorenza explains in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*:

Granted, the postmodern critique correctly insists that our subjectivities are 'scripted' and that the science and philosophy of elite Euro-American men have not known the world as it is but have created it as they wished it to be according to their own interest and likeness. Yet this recognition does not lead feminists to advocate a relativist pluralism. Rather, it compels feminist and other minority scholars to articulate a different knowledge and vision of the world, one that can inspire and sustain a liberating praxis (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 89).

History cannot, Schüssler Fiorenza argues, be understood naïvely as 'a record of what has happened' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 90) – a charge which might be levelled against Gutiérrez. Like Segundo, she maintains that texts always have ideologies, just as 'all representations of the world are informed by our own historical-cultural position, by the values and practices shaped by our historical-cultural location as well as by the ways we are implicated in power relations' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 91). However, she maintains the essential referentiality of history: 'Although in epistemological terms we can know the past today only in and

through historical discourse, past events have occurred' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 91). The challenge of feminist and other liberationist models of history is, then, to provide more adequate accounts of reality, which do not suppress the experience of the oppressed (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 93).

Picking up the pastoral significance of form and redaction criticism, which 'have demonstrated how much the biblical writings are theological responses to pastoral, practical situations' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 32), Schüssler Fiorenza balances it with the need to 'analyse [the writings'] sociopolitical contexts and expression' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 34). With Boff and Segundo, she concludes that 'the pastoral-theological paradigm does not permit a mere repetition or application of biblical texts, but demands a translation of their meaning and context into our own situation' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 36). On a larger scale, the inclusion of different theological viewpoints within the canon of scripture 'should be understood in an inclusive fashion as creating a multiform model of Christian church and Christian life' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 36). Here Schüssler Fiorenza appeals to the hermeneutical circle between text and interpreter, and its insistence on the inevitable questions and presuppositions of the interpreter to argue that 'people of different life styles, social backgrounds, and personal experience [must] become involved in the interpretation of Scripture' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 38).

The liberationists discussed have been trained in historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation, which they do not find incompatible with their interpretative approach. Yet though history, understood as the arena of God's liberative acts within and outwith the texts, is a necessary framework for liberation hermeneutics,

historical approaches to the texts remain very much in the background. Foregrounded is the personal experience of the interpreters themselves, in which God is equally expected to act.

Unlike classical historical-critical and many literary approaches, then, liberationist hermeneutics require some degree of reflection on one's personal context. In the academic context there are evident difficulties with practising such a methodology, as opposed to analysing the praxis of others, from both sides of the argument.

Liberationists may ask to what extent an approach based on the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed can function in the Academy without being co-opted by its context. Academicians may query whether, given not only Boff's stress on 'creative fidelity' but also Segundo's on second-level learning, such interpretation may not force an ideologically 'right' answer to precede the reflection from which it should be concluded, suppressing the alterity of the Gospels.

Congregational models of Bible study

Practical models of small-group local-church Bible study drawing on historical-critical, literary or liberationist approaches have been offered to the churches.

However, as the following examples will show, each of these demonstrates the deficiencies as well as the advantages of its methodology of origin. Since my research problem originally arose when church leaders trained in historical criticism did not enable the sharing of exegetical methods with their congregations, I shall also consider the location of expertise within each of these models.

Historical-critical versions generally follow the 'banking' model of information transfer – a term developed by Paulo Freire (for more detail see Chapter 3) to denote

education in which information is transmitted from learned scholar to ignorant pupil. In *Experiments with Bible Study*, for example, when Hans-Ruedi Weber deals with historical-critical issues, rather than letting the group interpret a biblical text for themselves, he tells them what scholars think the text means, thus supplying a ready-made and incontrovertible answer. His studies are not open-ended, but supply a universal conclusion to participants' deliberations, rather than allowing the development of local interpretations or praxis. Thus, though 'each person has something to contribute' (Weber 1981, 270), the level of such contributions is regulated by the enabler, who retains the real power within the group. Moreover, the emphasis on one 'right' answer, appropriate to all circumstances, indicates that his method relies on the 'scientific' character of historical-critical approaches. This understanding of history, however, has already been brought into question, both because its results are not consistently repeatable (see Watson above), and for the incapacity of its underlying philosophy to deal with transcendence.

How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, amplifies this classical historical-critical emphasis on one original meaning. Fee and Stuart divide the task of interpretation into exegesis: 'what was said to them back *then* and *there*' and hermeneutics: 'that same Word in the *here* and *now*' (Fee and Stuart 1983, 20, authors' emphasis). The first involves asking questions relating to historical and literary context and 'author's actual content' (Fee and Stuart 1983, 25). The second relies on the first, in that '*The only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text*' (Fee and Stuart 1983, 26, authors' emphasis). Though their disclosure of historical-critical methods is praiseworthy (for their discussion on interpreting the Gospels, see Fee and Stuart 1983, 110-116),

their underlying assumption is still that anyone following the correct exegetical procedures on the same text will produce the same results, to be 'translated' into different contexts. In this manner, control of the texts' meaning remains with the Academy.

Walter Wink's work also shows his origins in the classical historical-critical tradition, in the way in which his Bible studies begin with the historical 'strangeness' of the text. The type of questions posed by the leader in one of Wink's groups presupposes some training in historical-critical approaches:

How do the several versions of a saying differ, and why? What are the customs that are presupposed in the narrative? How might the statement have been modified by the church in order to apply it to later crises and conflicts? (Wink 1989, 88-89)

Wink's subsequent elicitation of the group's experiences in connection with the text shows he has also been influenced by liberationist approaches:

[W]e are all equals before the text, for in regard to our own experience we are all experts. And since it is the intersection of text with experience which evokes insights, no one need feel disadvantaged (Wink 1989, 38).

Yet the individualistic, psychological style of his application does not encourage insights into the group's communal or practical situation. When considering Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners, for example (for sample questions see Wink 1989, 121ff), group members, asked why they do not eat with the marginalised and outcast today, are assumed to identify with the Pharisees. Instead of further questions being posed about their experiences of church or societal inclusion and exclusion, they are then invited to get in touch with their own 'inner sinner' and 'inner Pharisee' in order to bring them into contact with Jesus.

Participants in Wink's groups may witness and enable each other's transformation, but that transformation and empowerment is still a one-by-one affair. This is confirmed by the absence of any expectation of concrete action resulting from the group's work.

Literary approaches to the text, majoring on hermeneutics rather than exegesis, are a less represented side of attempts to aid local-church study groups in biblical interpretation. One of the few examples of a literarily rather than historically based approach to lay hermeneutics, Perry B. Yoder's *Toward Understanding the Bible: Hermeneutics for Lay People* (Yoder 1978), arises from a background of linguistic semantics and philosophical hermeneutics.

Its first chapter, 'Games People Play with the Bible', gives a wry account of different techniques of distortion employed by Christians trying to make the texts mean what they want them to mean. Fowl's vigilant community of Christian readers would do well to keep such a checklist in mind. The Pope Game (an appeal to an infallible source of authority); the Caveman Game (the use of proof texts as weapons); and the Priesthood of All Believers Game (the idea that academic study of the Bible is an attack on the laity and should be avoided) are all sadly familiar to aficionados of church Bible study groups. By uncovering such ploys Yoder makes the power structures inherent in any group more transparent. However, when he claims the possibility of 'game-free' Bible study, liberationist suspicion comes into play.

While he deplores the Literal Game 'with its pick-and-choose hermeneutic' (Yoder 1978, 6), Yoder must admit that 'In the end, people will pick and choose what they consider appropriate to practice' (Yoder 1978, 65). Given that such biases

‘We poor idiots in the pew’

cannot easily be eradicated, a liberationist hermeneutic, which explicitly begins from the interpreters’ own location and declares their interests, appears a more honest way to study the Bible than the smuggling of our own assumptions under cover of expressed neutrality into the hermeneutical endeavour.

One such endeavour is John D. Davies’ and John J. Vincent’s *Mark At Work* (Davies and Vincent 1986). In a reversal of Wink’s priorities, they offer three discoveries for sharing with the book’s readership:

It’s best to start where we are – not where we might imagine New Testament people were. If Mark is to work on us, we have to be honest about who we are, and why we do what we do...

Through us, Mark will get to work in our world, our churches and our local communities, with some revolutionary ways of doing everything...

The Gospel has to be learned from each other. Our testimony is that everyone is a Bible interpreter (Davies and Vincent 1986, 12).

Davies’ and Vincent’s three-step method contains elements of experience, theory, reflection and planned action. In the first step the leader identifies experiences within the group which tally with the theme of a specified passage in Mark’s Gospel; what appears to be an open-ended question is, however, followed by a summary giving the ‘right’ answers. The second step offers parallels from the time of Jesus to each point of the summary, which explains why the experience elicited is so rigidly codified. The last step focusses back on the community from which the group comes, asking questions, tying in with the previous two steps, about what action can be taken on the topic concerned.

In this method of Bible study, unlike the historical-critical approaches above, not much specialist knowledge is required of the group leader. Yet the power of leadership seems to have been withdrawn one step, making the book rather than the

leader into an ungainsayable authority figure, which cannot be challenged in the flesh. Moreover, unlike Wink's approach, the biblical material presented is given through a banking format, presenting information rather than asking questions. In the final action section, the authors honour the specificity of the local context, but the method as a whole gives an uneasy feeling of dialogic study being imposed by 'banking' means.

Dialogue between congregation and Academy?

As the anecdote quoted from Smart demonstrates, the research problem I have isolated is not new. However, efforts made by believing theoreticians in hermeneutics to enter into dialogue with local-church biblical interpreters – as opposed to imposing cut-down versions of their own practice on such study groups – have been surprisingly few.

This may partly be due to the origins of historical-critical hermeneutics. Though developed by believing as well as unbelieving scholars, historical-critical interpretation has not felt the need to justify itself in a church context. Part of the impetus behind the formation of the Academy, indeed, was to escape from the dogmatic pronouncements of the institutional church, which had previously determined the legitimacy of biblical interpretation. Apart from that of the disaffected Walter Wink, the methodological work of the historical-critical scholars described above has not generally been extended to cover the context of lay Christians. Many people in local churches, unless educated into scepticism, remain within the pre-modern paradigm promulgated by the church institution; dissenters have been silenced or have left.

Moving on to consider literary approaches, some interpreters, such as Frei, in spite of the theological emphasis of their work and their narratological stress on interpreting one's life experience by reference to the life of Jesus, make little mention of either the community or the experiential aspects of biblical interpretation. Others, such as Stroup, Fowl or Watson, have involved 'the church' in their methodologies; have given it, indeed, a key hermeneutical role through their invocation of Christian tradition as an interpretative lens through which to classify the biblical genre as holy scripture. However, this emphasis has not extended to the consideration of how – in more detail than purely being church through worship and praxis – such interpretation should or does take place in local church communities. Such scholars appear to be uninterested in groups formed specifically for Bible study – though it is unclear where, if not in such groups, Fowl's vigilant and virtuous community of interpretation may be located.

Liberationists should have an advantage in connecting with local-church Bible study, given that their theorising is based on the hermeneutical experience of base Christian communities. However, analytical descriptions of liberationist biblical interpretation in a First World congregational context are rare, though it appears that Schüssler Fiorenza's work has been taken up in Switzerland as a method of group Bible study (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 55). This may partly be due to the difficulties of transplantation of methods between contexts, in a methodology for which context is all-important. Moreover, oppressed groups involved in such Bible study may wish to avoid the publicity of academic analysis, or may have insufficient resources to consider theoretical reflection on their praxis a high priority.

As this survey of the literature has demonstrated, the methodologies and presuppositions of academic historical-critical, literary and liberationist approaches to the interpretation of biblical texts have been widely analysed. Practical instruction in methods of local-church small-group Bible study is also common. Yet there has been little interest in the theoretical aspects of local-church biblical hermeneutics or their relationship with academic biblical interpretation.

One exception to this rule is to be found in the work of Gerald West, writing in South Africa. West's book *Contextual Bible study* (1993) straddles theory and practice, both describing the principles of contextual Bible study and giving case studies of how it has worked out in particular instances. The four commitments of contextual Bible study West isolates clearly show his liberationist leanings:

- to read the Bible from the perspective of the poor and oppressed (West 1993, 12f)
- to read the Bible in community with others, particularly with those from contexts different from our own, trained readers reading with ordinary readers (West 1993, 15f)
- to read the Bible critically using analysis and a hermeneutic of suspicion, remembering the ideological use made of the Bible in apartheid (West 1993, 18f)
- to have a commitment to personal and social transformation through contextual Bible study (West 1993, 23f).

However, his threefold division of the methodologies employed in contextual theology, focussing on questions 'behind the text' (historical/sociological); 'the text itself' (literary/narrative) and 'in front of the text' (thematic/symbolical) (West 1993, 27ff) parallels all three hermeneutical methodologies covered in this survey.

West makes liberationist use of the personal experience of members of his South African study groups which, taking place within a church community, also draw on the Christian tradition as their own (West 1999a, 9). As I shall argue below

(see Chapter 9), though his hermeneutical commitments do not specifically focus on the historical dimension of textual analysis, his intention to read the Bible 'critically' covers very similar territory. Here, then, is a hermeneutic using the insights of academic theology to engage with the practical context of local-church Bible study, a hermeneutic which takes both history and experience seriously.

Why is work like West's, putting local-church and academic hermeneutics in dialogue, not more common in the field of New Testament studies? Maybe in part because such questions have been deemed a matter of practical theology.

Schleiermacher comments that 'Practical theology... is only for those in whom an ecclesial interest and a scientific spirit are united' (Schleiermacher 1990, 131). Less helpfully, he limits its field to those 'tasks that are to be included within the notion of [clerical] "Church leadership"' (Schleiermacher 1990, 132), demonstrating the clergy/lay division which, as I argue, has contributed to my research problem. A more congenial definition comes from Duncan Forrester:

The peculiar responsibilities of Practical Theology involve acting as a bridge between theology and the social sciences and reflecting critically upon, learning from, and endeavouring to renew, reform and strengthen practice and, in particular, Christian practice... we cannot do this without looking to the priestly formation of the whole *laos*, the equipping of all the saints for the work of ministry (Forrester 1990, 7, 8).

It is my hope, furthermore, that dialogue between lay and academic hermeneutical approaches may not only equip the saints for ministry but also inspire New Testament scholars to fresh endeavours. I will return to this point in Chapter 9.

Research proposal

How may such a dialogue between local-church and academic interpretation of the Bible be essayed? The best insights of all three academic hermeneutics surveyed should be brought to the task, supplementing each other's deficiencies. Historical-critical approaches highlight the strange and multiple witnesses of the biblical texts. Literary approaches connect the biblical stories with our own. Liberationist approaches bring our personal experiences into the service of biblical interpretation. My proposal is therefore to construct a hermeneutical model including both history and experience for interpreting the biblical texts, specifically the Gospels, in local-church Bible study groups. I have labelled this model, a modified version of the hermeneutical circle (see Chapter 3), 'community hermeneutics'.

Given its stress on experience, community hermeneutics has necessarily been trialled in local-church Bible study groups. Data obtained from interviewees participating in such groups has formed the basis of a grounded-theory description of the process of biblical interpretation within a local-church group, validated by correlation with adult-education theory, both secular and Christian. Grounded theory aims to 'identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 13). Attention to the literature has found little British interaction between grounded theory and church-related contexts, though this methodology has been more extensively used in North America. My use of grounded theory will therefore further test its ability to generate theory of explanatory and predictive power in this area.

My thesis is divided into three parts. Part 1 will deal with the theoretical background to my topic. Continuing the analysis begun in my literature survey, Chapter 2 will consider understandings of the terms 'history' and 'experience' which make them either problematic or helpful in the service of faith-based biblical interpretation. In Chapter 3 Ricoeur's moderation of the Gadamer-Habermas debate will form the theoretical basis of my proposal to develop a modified form of the hermeneutical circle, community hermeneutics, as a model for Bible study, bridging the theoretical context of historical-critical methods and the practical context of life in church congregations.

Part 2 will deal with my fieldwork. A discussion of grounded theory methodology and the details of my fieldwork will be found in Chapter 4. Chapters 5-7 provide an analysis of the results of my grounded theory analysis, while Chapter 8 validates these by triangulation with theories of adult education.

Part 3 puts my research findings in a wider framework. While Chapter 9 puts the modes of biblical appropriation adopted by members of local-church study groups in dialogue with the theoretical hermeneutical methodologies described above, Chapter 10 offers a proposal for the profitable use of historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation in local-church study groups.

2. The tools tested: how can 'history' and 'experience' be hermeneutically helpful?

Chapter 1 has analysed historical-critical, literary and liberationist academic hermeneutics in terms of their use of history and/or experience as hermeneutical tools. Various understandings of 'history' and 'experience', however, can make these terms either problematic or helpful in the service of faith-based biblical interpretation within a local-church context. I shall consider each in turn and then, briefly, suggest a dialogue between the two, which I shall describe in more detail in Chapter 3.

History

Starting from the claim that Christianity is a historical religion, and the wide variety of meanings covered by the term 'history', the first part of this chapter considers modern and postmodern understandings of history as an academic discipline, connecting each with a possible approach to Gospel interpretation. It concludes that while history inevitably has rhetorical components, it is possible to claim accurate knowledge of the past, however limited by the perspective and interests of the historian. Using Ricoeur's understanding of fiction as necessary for the delineation of exceptional moments in history, the Gospels' claim to be perspectival written history, taking their miraculous component into account, is defended. The suitability of understanding them as part of the Church's history, whether institutionally or locally, is also considered, as are necessary boundary criteria for such interpretation.

Why history?

The modernist historian Butterfield expresses the traditional Christian case for the necessity of treating the Gospels as documents describing historical events:

Christianity is an historical religion in a particularly technical sense that the term possesses – it presents us with religious doctrines which are at the same time historical events or historical interpretations. In particular it confronts us with the questions of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, questions which may transcend all the apparatus of the scientific historian – as indeed many other things do – but which imply that Christianity in any of its traditional and recognisable forms has rooted its more characteristic and daring assertions in that ordinary realm of history with which the technical student is concerned (Butterfield 1949, 3).

Liberation theologians also stress (see Chapter 1) that the God whom Christians worship has acted and will act salvifically within 'ordinary' human history. As Gustavo Gutiérrez affirms, 'Biblical faith is, above all, faith in a God who reveals himself through historical events, a God who saves in history' (Gutiérrez 1974, 154). Such a claim, applied to the Gospels, must be tested by historical study, if it is not to lose its power. But is such an undertaking feasible? The 'scientific' understanding of history underlying much historical-critical work (see discussion of Troeltsch above, Chapter 1) has undermined any referential claim made by the Gospels to the manifestation of God in human history. Is history a blunted tool for interpreting the Gospels, which should be laid aside? Or may changing the underlying understanding of the term retrieve it for use in a faith context?

What is 'history'?

'History' is a potentially problematic term, given that the word has a wide semantic field. It can refer to the past itself, whether significant events or background information; the interpretation of that past, discerned through documentary,

archaeological or other evidence; the written descriptions resulting from such interpretation; as well as the academic discipline dealing with all the above. Within this discipline, there are two broad approaches to historical studies (Gardiner 1995a, 364). On the one hand, *critical* history focusses on the past itself and the accuracy of our retellings of it. Such topics as the socioeconomic and cultural life of Palestine at the time of Jesus would come into this category, with which historical criticism of the Gospels is wholly compatible. On the other, *speculative* history is teleological: focussing on patterns derived from the past in order to give a perspective on the future of humanity. Though the use of these particular labels may indicate a bias on the part of the article-writer in favour of critical history, in what follows I shall use 'speculative' history, in its teleological aspect, without any pejorative intent. Such topics as the historical referentiality of either Jesus' resurrection or the broader sweep of salvation history (see below) would come into this category; Troeltsch, among others, has argued that historical-critical analysis of the Gospels is inimical to it. In order to try to avoid confusion, I shall refer to both processes as 'history-writing', and the results as 'written history'.

Each of these understandings of historical study will be significant in my subsequent analysis. The question of historical referentiality raised by Butterfield, while potentially important in both, is more central for speculative history. While the goal of critical history is greater understanding, which can always be revised in the light of additional information, a pattern incorrectly discerned from past events misunderstood is an unreliable guide for future expectations.

Yet another meaning of the word 'history' confuses the issue further: a synonym for 'story', with no referential connotations. This use of the word casts doubt on the possibility of being able to understand 'history' as dealing with actual past events and people at all. Can history and story be distinguished, or are historical *reconstructions* actually fictional constructions, founded on the imagination of the historian rather than on what once was? Such a question only makes sense in the light of the current shift from modernity to postmodernity, which is changing the way historians understand their work. Considering the work of representative modern and postmodern historians, I shall explore how this change in understanding impacts on the usefulness of history as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting the Gospels.

History '*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*'?

If history is an objective science (in the Newtonian sense), history and story are poles apart. One describes what actually happened, the other may imagine any happening but bears no necessary relation to real life. In order to distinguish such critical history from story and guard its scientific status, then, accuracy of data collection and repeatability of results is required of the scientific historian. This view of history was exemplified in the nineteenth century by the historian Leopold von Ranke. The aim of Ranke and his followers was not to judge history by their own standards, but to demonstrate objectively *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* – how it actually had been. The historian Richard J. Evans describes the methods of studying documents which Ranke established to elicit historical data, methods which are still at the heart of historical work:

Ranke introduced into the study of modern history the methods that had recently been developed by philologists... to determine whether a text... was true or

corrupted by later interpolations, whether it was written by the author it was supposed to be written by, and which of the available versions was the most reliable (Evans 2000, 17-18).

Through the nineteenth century, historians endeavoured to follow Ranke's ideals of objective history-writing. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, belief in this possibility was severely shaken, both by a scientific paradigm shift away from the fixed Newtonian to the relative Einsteinian universe and, more crucially, by the lack of scholarly objectivity demonstrated by historians during the First World War.

As Evans recounts:

Professional historians in every country rushed into print with elaborate defences of the war aims of their own governments and denunciations of other great powers for having begun the conflict. Substantial collections of documents on the origins of the war were produced with all the usual scholarly paraphernalia and edited by reputable professionals, but on principles of selection that seemed manifestly biased to colleagues in other countries (Evans 2000, 28).

Though Ranke's philological checklist is still essential for the study of historical documents, his method also demonstrates how historians' own worldview and presuppositions inevitably colour their rendering of data and chronicle into written history. Moreover, the assumption behind his philological method, that the earliest part of the text is necessarily the most significant, is not necessarily valid for documents like the Gospels which may be enriched rather than damaged by the 'creative fidelity' of community reworking (see discussion of Clodovis Boff's methodology, Chapter 1). With this argument speculative history comes into play.

The Gospels as records of 'how it was'

Ranke's understanding of history became a recognised mode of enquiry for nineteenth-century New Testament interpretation, as scholars aimed to show by the use of historical-critical methods how events behind the Gospel texts really had been,

while avoiding contamination by the dogmatic presuppositions of faith. Working within this methodology, Troeltsch laid down his famous principles of analogy, criticism and correlation as guidelines for good practice in studying the biblical texts (see Chapter 1). Interestingly, though these operated in such a way as to cut out the possibility of God's revelation being experienced within history, Troeltsch himself regarded a continuing connection between faith and history as psychologically necessary:

Faith... depends upon history, but not only for sustenance and information; its own self-understanding depends upon history, and within history upon the embodiment of revelation to which it looks. Without a conscious relationship to Christ the Christian faith is unthinkable... The Christian faith originated in the historical disclosure of the life of God, and for the sake of clarity and power it must be constantly referred back to this foundation, which is vitally present to the imagination... if the community is to retain its vital force (Troeltsch 1991, 135).

His solution was to look forward to the time when historical criticism would have reached assured results, however few:

The historical connection of faith will then attach itself all the more to major points, to the religious personalities of Jesus and Paul, of Augustine and Luther, leaving everything else to the scholars and critics. The main point, the personality of Jesus, will be interpreted in so universal a manner that faith will continue to be able to link whatever it regards as sacred and precious to it, and even future acquisitions will find room in it... Historical criticism can give us nothing more; but this is sufficient (Troeltsch 1991, 142).

However, quests for the 'historical Jesus', from the eighteenth century to the present day, have produced such varied results as to diminish rather than enhance Christians' understanding of him. It has not proved possible to leave 'everything else to the scholars and critics', since in the worst-case scenario very little may be left as an anchor for faith. The scholars of the Jesus Seminar, for example, allow the historical Jesus to have spoken only the first two words of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's Gospel – and in Luke only the first word (Funk et al. 1993, 148, 325). It would be

easy to conclude, with many literary scholars (see Chapter 1), that history is of no use for interpreting the New Testament within the community of faith. However, this would entail abandonment of the teleological claim that God is revealed in historical events. May a postmodern way of understanding history prove more fruitful?

Are we interested in 'what happened' at all?

If history depends on the historian as much as on the facts, interpretations from different practitioners will be expected to differ, and variety – within the constraints of the artform and community consensus – is to be welcomed. Such a scenario is to be found within the philosophical complex of ideas clustering under the umbrella heading of postmodernity. Postmodern theories about the infinite deferrability of textual meaning and the irrelevance of authorial intention, leading to the impossibility – and undesirability – of judging a text on the basis of its correspondence with external data (see Adam 1995), claim that the whole of reality is, in some sense, textual. On this view, there *is* no 'outside' reality with which written history must correspond.

In a weaker form of postmodern thought, the intellectual historian Hayden White does not quarrel with the distinction made in Aristotle's *Poetics* between history and fiction:

The distinction between historian and poet... consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be (Aristotle 1920, 43).

In his early work White sees, however, no reason for distinguishing the *interpretation* of fact from that of fiction. This brackets the question of historical referentiality. Moreover, he holds that claims to tell history 'how it actually was'

cannot be refereed by appeal to the facts, since, given the same facts, different historians make completely different stories out of them. His test case, comprehensively treated in *Metahistory* (White 1973), is the greatly varying interpretations of the French Revolution produced by different nineteenth-century historians (see also White 1978, 61).

White's early work argues that there is no intrinsic meaning to events, only a choice among possible interpretations (White 1978, 84-85):

[H]istorical situations do not have built into them intrinsic meanings in the way that literary texts do. Historical situations are not inherently tragic, comic or romantic. They may all be inherently ironic, but they need not be emplotted that way (White 1978, 85).

This position of detachment is reminiscent of Ranke's aim of recording the facts 'as they were'. However, White's own worldview is briefly visible in the telling phrase that '[h]istorical situations... may all be *inherently* ironic' (my italics). He appears to understand the universe as inherently meaningless: a belief system in which the most fitting response to any historical situation is an ironic one.

Certainly, one advantage to White's stress on the literary qualities of history-writing is his insight that the narratives of written history are characterised not only by varying degrees of historical accuracy, but also by a rhetorical, persuasive component, which addresses the emotions and the imagination rather than the cognitive intellect. As he argues:

Obviously, considered as accounts of events already established as facts, 'competing narratives' can be assessed, criticized, and ranked on the basis of their fidelity to the factual record, their comprehensiveness, and the coherence of whatever arguments they may contain. But narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and

retorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story (White 1992, 38).

However, acknowledgment of a rhetorical component to history-writing does not logically entail the invalidity of the moral judgements which, White argued in his early work, the historian imposes arbitrarily on inherently meaningless events (White 1987, 21, 24). One severe test of White's approach is a comparatively recent series of historical events: the Holocaust or *Shoah*. Over the past twenty years revisionist historians have argued that the extermination of six million Jews in German concentration camps never happened: that it was invented or exaggerated by Jews for propaganda purposes. This interpretation of the historical data has been hotly disputed, not only by Jewish organisations, but also by academic historians. Richard Evans, for example, comments:

There is in fact a massive, carefully empirical literature on the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Clearly, to regard it as fictional, unreal, or no nearer to historical reality than, say, the work of the 'revisionists' who deny that Auschwitz ever happened at all, is simply wrong. Here is an issue where evidence really counts, and can be used to establish the essential facts. Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivializes mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric. Auschwitz was indeed inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen either as a comedy or a farce. And if this is true of Auschwitz, then it must be true at least to some degree of other past happenings, events, institutions, people as well (Evans 2000, 124).

In the light of this very instance White has revised his position. Speaking of the Holocaust, he admits:

In the case of an emplotment of the events of the Third Reich in a 'comic' or 'pastoral' mode, we would be eminently justified in appealing to 'the facts' in order to dismiss it from the lists of 'competing narratives' of the Third Reich (White, 1992, 40).

Here he has shifted ground from his early work, describing how the literary methods used by historians imply a fictive element to their work, to a later admission of

the importance of distinguishing between fiction on the one hand and history on the other:

[My position] is not to say that there is no such thing as a historical 'event', that there is no possibility of distinguishing between 'fact' and 'fiction', or that everything is 'ideology', or, beyond that, 'anything goes', everything is 'relative' and nothing is 'objective'. What it does mean is that what counts as an event, as a fact, and as an adequate representation or explanation of a historical phenomenon must be adjudged to be 'relative' to the time, place and cultural conditions of its formulation (White 1995, 244).

This weaker, perspectival claim about history is more sustainable. Facts, though interpreted, have a degree of 'givenness' which does not allow for random emplotment. However, the cultural context of any written history, and the component of rhetoric within it, cannot be ignored.

Gospel 'story' rather than 'history'?

Over the last few decades there has been a shift in biblical interpretation, paralleling the shift from modernity to postmodernity, towards rejecting Ranke's view of history, with its damaging effects on faith, and focussing instead on the literary and specifically the narrative qualities of the Gospels. Hans Frei (see Chapter 1) may be taken as an exemplar of this approach: for Frei, it is the story to be found within the Gospel texts, rather than the history behind them, which is crucial for faith.

This treatment of the Gospels can be illuminated by a parallel in history-writing. The historian E.H. Carr understands historical events as those past happenings on which historical validity has been conferred by the authoritative *a priori* decision of competent historians, rather than merely by having occurred:

It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context... The fact that you arrived in this

building half an hour ago on foot, or on a bicycle, or in a car, is just as much a fact about the past as the act that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. But it will probably be ignored by historians (Carr 1961, 11).

Thus, though for different reasons, Carr, like Frei, understands the text – in his own case, the text of written history – to be more significant than the events lying behind it.

Carr's view of the historian as a creative artist, like White's focus on the historian's rhetorical abilities (see above) above and Collingwood's on the historical imagination (see below Chapter 3), reveals a strict division between the genres of story and of history to be untenable. Frei's bracketing of the question of referentiality appears to take biblical interpretation a step away from history in the direction of purely literary criticism. Yet his strategy is not so dissimilar from that of Carr. Though Carr, as a historian, creates the significant text, whereas for Frei significance resides in the pre-existing text, the latter seeks to exert an equivalent control over textual interpretation. Frei's synthetic view of the four Gospels determines the version of Jesus' story to which the faithful should conform their own: a version with which liberationists, for example, might take issue. Yet as events behind the texts exert some control over Carr's authoritative historical reconstruction, so they must over Frei's understanding of the story of Jesus. Though Frei's approach to the text is narrative, he relies for the success of his interpretative strategy on a teleological understanding of history.

There are certainly advantages in literary approaches to the Gospel texts. The postmodern valuing of difference has led to a welcome variety in biblical interpretation, after the one 'right answer' permitted by Ranke's way of doing

history, which had obscured the legitimately multiple meanings of a text, authorial and otherwise, recognised by Augustine of Hippo, himself no postmodernist:

'[W]hen from the same words of scripture not just one, but two or more meanings may be extracted, even if you cannot tell which of them the writer intended, there is no risk if they can all be shown from other places of the holy scriptures to correspond with the truth' (Augustine 1996, 186). Using a postmodern approach, the stories of faith may be preserved for the faith community as texts of value, without having to weather the potentially destructive effects of historical criticism (see Chapter 1).

Furthermore, the shift to the multiple viewpoints of postmodernism has returned some academic credibility to a faith perspective: 'God' can be as valid an actor in the language game of Christianity as 'Capitalism' is in that of economics. Talk of language games, however, hints at the relativity of interpretation implied by White's early work, denying the very possibility of judging between different textual interpretations by appeal to events 'behind the texts'. The case-study of the Holocaust, and White's own response, demonstrates the impossibility of such a relativist approach.

Can historians find out about history?

What conclusions may be drawn concerning the nature of the historical enterprise?

Richard Evans is a historian who steers an intermediate course between Ranke and White. His report on the state of history as a discipline is modestly optimistic:

Everyone, even the most diehard deconstructionist, concedes in practice that there is extratextual reality... Through the sources we use, and the methods with which we handle them, we can, if we are very careful and thorough, approach a reconstruction of past reality that may be partial and provisional, and certainly will not be objective, but is nevertheless true. We know, of course, that we will be guided in selecting

materials for the stories we tell, and in the way we put these materials together and interpret them, by moral and political beliefs, by an aesthetic sense, even by our own unconscious assumptions and desires. It is an illusion to believe otherwise. But the stories we tell will be true stories, even if the truth they tell is our own, and even if other people can and will tell them differently (Evans 2000, 249-50).

While Evans argues that history can tell 'true stories', the 'reconstruction of past reality' he aims at no longer claims total objectivity. Yet though 'partial and provisional', he insists that his reconstruction is 'nevertheless true'. This is a third understanding of history-writing, which I shall call perspectival.

The unconsciously perspectival tendency of historians at both ends of the interpretative spectrum from modern to postmodern has been exposed in this survey: witness the nationalistic tendencies of the First World War historians and White's assumption that all historical situations are inherently ironic. Whatever the intention behind history-writing proclaimed by different schools of thought, in practice – though not all admit that their work is perspectival – every historian chooses to ask particular questions from a specific angle about some aspect of history they adjudge to be important.

Some historians (such as Sir Geoffrey Elton: see Elton 1967) understand the story of 'great people' (frequently upper-class White men), and the events through which they influenced the course of national or international affairs, to be the proper focus for history. Others (such as the French *Annales* school of thought) focus on more impersonal forces, endeavouring by means of statistics to track the recurring rhythms which shape societies. Yet others (E.P. Thompson among them; see Thompson 1980) find the true story of history in a close scrutiny of the experience of supposedly unimportant or powerless individuals or groups. A historian from each of these

tendencies would examine the same data with different presuppositions, asking different questions, and drawing different, yet potentially legitimate, conclusions.

Given this spectrum of approaches to writing history, historians should be prepared to give an account of the ideological approach which lies behind their choice of topic and the questions they ask, for ideology as well as rhetoric inevitably colours a historian's work. It is instructive, in this context, to note that the non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust (of whom there were five million) rarely make an appearance in the argument over revisionism. Whether homosexuals, gypsies, people with disabilities or particular national groups, the viewpoint of these underdogs has been underrepresented (for personal testimonies see Friedman 1995). In reaction to such perceived injustices, ideological historians, Marxists and feminists among them, have made visible the presuppositions behind every historian's agenda by telling the subversive story of the underdogs in history, recalling (in J.B. Metz' telling phrase) 'dangerous memories' which may lead to change:

The historical process by which a nation, race or class become subjects almost always begins with their breaking through the power of the official idea of history by exposing it as propaganda on the part of those who rule them... In this history of conquest, those who are conquered and oppressed are not remembered... In this, then, memory operates above all as a category by which historical identity is found and as a category of liberation (Metz 1980, 66-67).

Are the Gospels written history?

As this chapter has demonstrated, historical approaches have been used, with varying degrees of success, in past and present study of the Gospels. In Chapter 1 I describe Watson's theological arguments for delineating the Gospels as written history (see Chapter 1). From the perspective of history as a discipline, however, how reasonable is it to treat the Gospels not only as historical source material relating to the early

Christian movement, but also as written history: in Evans' words, 'reconstruction[s] of past reality'?

No attempt to classify the Gospels into any contemporary genre has achieved universal acceptance, yet the *bios* ('a subtype of Greco-Roman biography') view of them argued by, for example, D.E. Aune, assumes that 'the Evangelists wrote with historical intentions' (Aune 1987, 64). Moreover, compared with some other parts of the Bible (such as the Wisdom literature), they are certainly presented as written history. In particular, the beginnings of Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles show an intention to frame these narratives historiographically (see Luke 1:1-4, Acts 1:1). As Aune describes it, 'Luke was an eclectic Hellenist Christian historian who narrated the early history of Christianity from its origins in Judaism with Jesus of Nazareth through its emergence as a relatively independent religious movement open to all ethnic groups' (Aune 1987, 138-39).

The commitment of the Gospel texts – all written post-Easter – to a particular set of interpretations of Jesus' status (whether ontological or functional) is evident, from the beginning of Mark's Gospel (Mark 1:1) to the end of John's Gospel (John 20:30-31). Moreover, John's Gospel makes it clear (John 21:25) that not every possible story about Jesus has been told: principles of selectivity have been employed to communicate the message. However, though ideological documents, the Gospels are not hagiographies. 'Hard' sayings of Jesus (such as Mark 8:34) are retained, and early church leaders are not always shown in a good light (though this, of course, reflects rhetorical as well as historical factors). There is also an implicit

acknowledgment, in the subsequent church decision to allow four canonical Gospels rather than one, that multiple perspectives on Jesus are permissible.

The Gospels, then, can be understood in form as intentionally perspectival writings composed in order to promulgate a certain set of views about Jesus of Nazareth.

This, as we have seen, does not disqualify them from being written history. However, an obstacle stands in the way of the Gospels being understood as historically referential. They contain an element of the miraculous: even perspectivally, can such texts be understood as portraying historical events?

Correct assignment of literary genre is evidently crucial for determining how far it is sensible to raise the question of historical referentiality within the Gospel texts. To draw a Hebrew Bible parallel, historical-critical analysis can discern two stories at the beginning of Genesis, and can assign Genesis 2 an earlier date of historical formation than Genesis 1, without needing to assign referentiality to either account. In the Gospels there is evidently intentional fiction. Jesus makes frequent use of parable and trope in his teaching; there is no point in trying to establish the year in which a sower went out to sow (Matthew 13:3ff and parallels). There are also widely accepted historical data to be found within the Gospel narratives: for example, that Jesus was crucified. But the line between story and history in the Gospels is blurred, and the presence within them of different types of miracle portrayed as historical events is more or less problematic, depending on one's worldview. For many Scottish Reformed Christians, for instance, there may be some difficulty involved in accepting Jesus' healings as historical (though less than those incidents concerned

with his control over the forces of nature), whereas Christians in African Independent Churches may find such accounts quite normal.

Since Strauss first took the category of myth as key to the understanding of the Gospels, it has repeatedly been suggested that their miraculous incidents should be understood as mythic symbols expressive of a more general worldview: see, for a recent example, the work of David Jenkins (Chapter 1). The key to this symbolism has varied from philosophical existentialism (Bultmann 1960) to Jewish midrash (Spong 1992); symbolic treatments in terms of plot and character have also proved fruitful (Frye 1982). However, as the quotation from Butterfield at the beginning of this chapter makes clear, traditionally the Gospels have also been understood as laying claim to 'religious doctrines understood as historical events or historical interpretations'. How may this difficulty be resolved?

One solution may be to understand fiction and history as different modes of narrative, purposefully intermingled within the Gospel texts for the purpose of expressing extraordinary moments within Butterfield's 'ordinary realm of history'. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, Ricoeur suggests that fiction may be necessary fully to express 'classic' moments of more than usually powerful human experience:

I have in mind those events that a historical community holds to be significant because it sees in them an origin, a return to its beginnings. These events, which are said to be 'epoch-making,' draw their specific meaning from their capacity to found or reinforce the community's consciousness of its identity, its narrative identity, as well as the identity of its members... (Ricoeur 1988, 187).

Ricoeur's example takes us back to the Holocaust, an undeniably historical set of events which he categorises as the *tremendum horrendum*: '[T]he Holocaust has been

considered a negative revelation, an Anti-Sinai' (Ricoeur 1988, 188). He sees the role of fiction as

giv[ing] eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep. The present state of literature on the Holocaust provides ample proof of this. Either one counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims... fiction is placed in the service of the unforgettable. It permits historiography to live up to the task of memory (Ricoeur 1988, 188-89).

Extending Ricoeur's argument, Watson instances in this category Primo Levi's book of short stories about the Holocaust, *Moments of Reprieve*: 'In the preface from which the phrase "moments of reprieve" is drawn, the author asserts the historical veracity underlying the fictional artifice of his stories' (Watson 1997, 62). Rather than expressing an idealist view of how the world is or should be in general, such fictive devices, integrated within a historical narrative, can express an inexpressible historical reality in a manner impossible for more conventional written history, as Watson explains:

'[M]oments of reprieve' refers us not to isolated, datable, verifiable events but to a possibility which, when actualized, denied to the *tremendum horrendum* the total dehumanization it sought to enact. One might speak of this denial as an event; but this would be an event inaccessible to 'normal' historical verification and open only to a fictional rendering of possibilities in stories fulfilling a representative function in relation to the real (Watson 1997, 62).

If this is the case, the presence of miracles in the Gospels does not debar them from being written history.

Ricoeur's strategy of placing history and fiction along the one narrative continuum leaves a grey area in Gospel interpretation where events can be construed in either genre. Yet this difficulty is bound to arise when considering any event which is past, as Watson acknowledges:

The gospels are not the only historiographical texts whose explanatory conventions seem implausible to sceptical and suspicious readers; on the contrary, the absence of universal explanatory conventions means that any conceivable historiographical text will have to reckon with sceptical and suspicious readers (Watson 1997, 60).

Members of each church community must make their own hermeneutical decisions, based on their own worldview and their appraisal of the texts. Moreover, if

Clodovis Boff's principle of 'creative fidelity' (see Chapter 1) is applied,

descriptions traceable to the Gospel writers or their communities, rather than Jesus, may be ascribed to the continuing revelation of the Spirit, working within the community to answer the problems of experience using the resources of history.

Contemporary local churches are also such 'second Christians', as John Vincent puts it (Davies and Vincent 1986, 10), trying to interpret the Gospel afresh in the context of their own experience, and looking to their predecessors for precedent and inspiration.

The Gospels as the Church's history

Can such an approach to the Gospels as written history bring out the teleological significance of past patterns for the Church's future? In an earlier essay, Ricoeur enlarges upon the idea of positive revelation, the *tremendum fascinosum*, in considering the significance of particular biblical events which 'engender history'

such as the election of Abraham, the Exodus, the anointing of David, etc. in the Old Testament, and the resurrection of Christ for the early church. The idea of revelation then appears as connected to the very character of these events. What is noteworthy about them is that they do not simply occur and then pass away. They mark an epoch and engender history... In such instances, to speak of revelation is to qualify the events in question as transcendent in relation to the ordinary course of history. The whole faith of Israel and of the early church is tied up here in the confession of the transcendent character of such nuclear founding and instituting events (Ricoeur 1981a, 78).

Of the five different modes of revelation Ricoeur isolates within the biblical text

(Ricoeur 1981a, 75-90), he characterises narrative discourse as one medium through which God's act is discerned:

What is essential in the case of narrative discourse is the emphasis on the founding event or events as the imprint, mark, or trace of God's act. Confession takes place through narration and the problematic of inspiration is in no way the primary consideration. God's mark is in history before being in speech. It is only secondarily in speech inasmuch as this history itself is brought to language in the speech-act of narration... To recognize the specificity of this form of discourse, therefore, is to guard ourselves against a certain narrowness of any theology of the Word which only attends to word events. In the encounter with what we could call the idealism of the word event, we must reaffirm the realism of the event of history (Ricoeur 1981a, 79, 80).

Ricoeur's linking of God's act with 'the event of history', like that of Gutiérrez, is based on Gerhard von Rad's work on salvation history in the Hebrew Bible, for example *God at Work in Israel* (von Rad 1980). Oscar Cullmann, a New Testament scholar for whom salvation history is significant, carries this line through the Gospel communities to those of the Church today in a manner reminiscent of Gadamer's use of tradition (for a discussion of Gadamer's work see Chapter 3):

If, in accordance with our knowledge of form criticism, we regard the early Christian Church as the legitimate place of origin of the interpretation of Jesus' life and message, then, despite the great chronological distance, we must not exclude the life of the Church of today from our understanding of the New Testament writings (Cullmann 1967, 327).

Ricoeur makes the same argument (Ricoeur 1981a, 56). Salvation history, however, has fallen out of favour in the last few decades. According to John Goldingay this teleological approach, emphasising 'the factuality of God's acts in history by which human redemption was achieved, particularly major "acts of God" such as the exodus and the resurrection', has been faulted by biblical scholars, and largely discarded, for

oversimplifying the nature of scripture (which has other themes than this one), for falsifying the nature of Israel's distinctiveness in relation to other peoples (who also portrayed their gods as acting in history), for understating the significance of word in relation to event in biblical faith, and for working with a Pickwickian understanding of 'acts of God' and/or an idiosyncratic definition of 'history' and/or a different conception of history from the Bible's own (Goldingay 1990, 606).

It would not be fair to criticise this summary of the current scholarly position for its condensed presentation of a complex topic. However, some of the points raised here may usefully be considered to find out to what extent a modified form of salvation history is still feasible for interpretation of the Gospels.

The argument that salvation history is not the only possible mode of biblical revelation is just, and Ricoeur acknowledges it; yet, since the Gospels are presented as written history, their genre is compatible with such an approach. The charge that salvation history falsifies Israel's distinctiveness in relation to other peoples seems to be based upon an attempted neutrality on the historian's part which, as has been seen above, is both unachievable for any historian and undesirable from a faith perspective. Similarly, Goldingay's reservations about proper understandings of 'history', 'acts of God' and 'the Bible's conception of history' are put into a wider context by the whole discussion of history in this chapter. Given the complexities involved, semantic and philosophical, some idiosyncrasy in definition seems almost inevitable. If one's presuppositions are clearly laid out, this obstacle does not seem to me insuperable.

Ironically, Kevin Vanhoozer has queried Ricoeur's success in the endeavour of 'understating the significance of word in relation to event in biblical faith' of which Goldingay complains. Vanhoozer believes that while in theory Ricoeur privileges

'the realism of the event of history' over 'the idealism of the word event', in practice he reads historical narratives for values rather than events:

For Ricoeur, resurrection testimony is not the proclamation of an event that opens up new possibilities but the manifestation, experience and expression of an essential, though forgotten, possibility... [but] there must be two conditions for the Christian possibility: the historical deed and the poetic word (Vanhoozer 1990, 265).

This clash of worldviews concerning Ricoeur's work as interpreted by Goldingay and by Vanhoozer – reminiscent of the medieval struggle between nominalism and realism – does not in itself invalidate the use of salvation history by those who think in terms of the latter. It is not my intention in this thesis, moreover, to argue that written history, whether understood critically or speculatively, is the only possible category for understanding the Gospels. Yet there are theological and pastoral factors in favour of understanding the Gospels in this way: theologically, in that remembering God's acts in history helps us understand who God is; pastorally, in that, through this remembering, the Gospel story can also become our own.

As we have already seen in Metz's work, and particularly in the case of the Holocaust, it is crucial to pass down, from one generation to the next, memory of the historic events which give a community its identity. As Ricoeur says of the *tremendum horrendum* which was the *Shoah*, 'The will not to forget alone can prevent these crimes from ever occurring again' (Ricoeur 1988, 189). More generally, the historian has, in Ricoeur's phrase, a debt to pay to the past. To the extent that the Gospels narrate past events, it is incumbent upon the Christian community to pay the debt owed to their ancestors in the faith by remembering these events. When the memories concerned are 'dangerous', subversive of the status quo, the necessity of remembering, according to Metz, is all the stronger (Metz 1980, 90).

In current questions of church government and authority, such as the debate in some churches over the ordination of women, both sides appeal to the normativity of historical precedents to be found in the Gospel texts (see Schneiders 1993, 45).

Here speculative history is being practised for its teleological focus: looking to the past in order to decide on patterns for the future. Like different interpretations of the Holocaust, different visions of the future, seeking actualisation by reference to the past, must be tested critically against the written history of the Gospels, as much by the local church community as by the Church universal. As Edward Schillebeeckx argues on this topic:

[T]heology, as a critical and rational reflection about faith, works with a hypothesis which is the thesis of faith: the meaning that is given in the bible [sic] not only can be made present and actual again and again in history, but also must and will be actualised in this way. In the course of history, this hypothesis must be tested, and we must also remain open to the possibility that it will be falsified rather than proved true, especially if the attempt to make the meaning of the bible [sic] present in history is definitively abandoned... [T]he theologian... bases himself [sic] rather on the presupposition that it is not impossible to give a meaning to history, however ambiguous it may be, and therefore that the attempt to do so should never be abandoned (Schillebeeckx 1974, 152-53).

Of course, deriving the identity and direction of a faith community from its history is not free from danger. A church fixated on history may forget the eschatological orientation which is also part of the Christian heritage. Moreover, even from the Gospel texts history can never be read unambiguously: here a teleologically normative approach, stressing certain patterns over others, may come to oversimplistic conclusions. Joining Ebeling and Käsemann (see Chapter 1), Schillebeeckx warns:

The meaning that is communicated to us in the historical event of revelation is not a tautologous system that is above history: faith too shares in the ambivalence that is common to everything historical, just as Jesus himself shared in the disputable character that characterises the history of man (Schillebeeckx 1974, 142).

Furthermore, the negative side to history as a factor in community identity and purpose cannot be ignored. As we see from Ireland and Palestine, the story of origins holding a community together may be distorted to serve the ends of its leaders, or other groups struggling for power within it. Any such account, however, is only one version of events, however much authority may try to fence it off from criticism. Instead of leaving the field of interpretation to distorted versions of history (of which Holocaust denial is surely one of the most pernicious) therefore, dialogue between different historical perspectives should be encouraged. New questions about the past, raised from different points of view in the present, may in this manner give rise to new insights about both past and present, as Raphael Samuel describes:

It is true that our knowledge of the past is crucially shaped by the preoccupations we bring to bear on it, and that we can only interpret the evidence within the limits of an imaginative vision which is itself historically conditioned. But this is by no means as unilaterally disabling as it may appear. Our own experience may blunt our perceptions in certain directions, but it will certainly sharpen them in others, giving us access to meanings which were not available to the historical actors at the time, and allowing us to counter their 'representations' with our own. It will also spotlight whole orders of phenomena to which even our immediate predecessors were blind (Samuel 1981, xlv).

What sort of history?

As many histories may be constructed as there are Christians to ask different questions of the texts. From a faith-community perspective, however, not every rhetorical trope can plot this data adequately. It has been argued that the Christian metanarrative makes comedy, culminating in the *eucatastrophe* of the resurrection, the ultimately appropriate form (Dante 1949, 1955, 1962; Tolkien 1964), though components of romance, irony and tragedy are also to be found. Liberationists would argue that God's 'bias to the poor' should also inform the type of questions Christians ask of the Gospels. Ricoeur would agree: 'Not just any theology may be

attached to the story form, only a theology that celebrates Yahweh as the great liberator' (Ricoeur 1981a, 91). Such a caveat, however, runs the danger already posed above, when considering Frei's work, of restricting textual interpretation to the telling of one story only. It may be easier to recognise invalid interpretations than to give an exhaustive account of valid ones.

Perspectival history, then, which is also characterised by rhetorical components – history inseparably entwined with story – is arguably a valid tool for interpreting the Gospels. What of personal experience?

Experience

Since personal experience has been little used in academic biblical interpretation, rather than offering an analysis of its past employment, the remainder of this chapter argues for its use in local-church biblical interpretation. Rather than solely 'religious' experience, 'personal experience' is taken as the whole experience of living, which in its 'thick' complexity parallels the complexity of the Gospels' textual development. Experience and text are connected by their narrative status; yet assuming uniformity between human experiences in every context threatens to deny and suppress real difference, whereas assuming discontinuity threatens communication. To counter this I argue for a relational understanding of personhood, made in God's image and enhanced through relationships within a study group. Personal experience and the Gospels are also connected by content: both Christian doctrine and the Bible describe everyday experience as the medium through which human beings encounter God's prevenient self-revelation. Yet experience is not

unambiguously sacramental, including disaster, human fallibility and disobedience, and requires critical appraisal to be a useful tool for interpreting the Gospels.

What sort of experience?

Reflecting on 'the situation of faith', Edward Farley uses as his data everyday experience in general rather than religious experience in particular,

in order to avoid the habitual ways of looking at reality and get beyond the usual ways of conceptualizing things. Farley seeks... to examine the situation of faith. The initial concern, however, is to avoid losing the situation or the event by applying too quickly the usual theological categories to interpret it (Patton 1990, 41).

Such a technique of willed naïveté may be compared with Jesus' injunction (see for example Mark 10:15) that entering God's kingdom requires a childlike attitude.

While not depending on the idealist project of phenomenology, it could be described, in Farley's terminology, as manifesting a 'phenomenological attitude':

Working with the phenomenological attitude [some thinkers] not only attempt to deal with a subject matter as it shows itself; they also permit it to generate the terms, categories, and methods appropriate to itself. The phenomenological attitude tries not to determine the object in advance by imposing arbitrary or foreign interpretative categories and methods. The antithesis of the phenomenological attitude is the reductionist or dogmatic attitude (Farley 1975, 28).

The reductionist attitude Farley seeks to avoid would be demonstrated on an academic level by the splitting of personal experience into more manageable subsections. The category of 'religious experience' might lead into discussion of spirituality, mysticism or unusual psychological states; more theory-laden discourses might be used to classify further aspects of experience – aesthetic, economic and so on. Meanwhile, on a different section of the agenda, biblical texts might be studied in isolation from the successors of those communities of faith in and for which they

were generated. In such reductionistic exercises the complexity both of everyday personal experience and of the Gospel texts is not taken into account.

'Thick' experience and text

On multiple levels both personal experience and Gospel texts are 'thickly' contextual – Clifford Geertz' description (Geertz 1993b). Experience of the world can never be apprehended in a direct and unmediated manner. Rather, it is interpreted from within a learned and culturally specific framework of 'the way the world works', and any retelling of experience is bound to be influenced by that framework. Geertz has queried even such a commonsensical notion as the universality of common sense (Geertz 1993a, 75), though, studying the various manifestations of 'common sense' within different cultures, he finds commonalities between them (Geertz 1993a, 85).

Yet as the historian E.P. Thompson argues, experience of life in community is also one of the major factors that shapes our thought:

[C]hanges take place within social being, which give rise to changed experience: and this experience is determining, in the sense that it exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness, proposes new questions, and affords much of the material which the more elaborated intellectual exercises are about (Thompson 1978, 200).

Just as the interpretative framework of our lives shapes our understanding of experience, then, so experience informs that same framework. The hermeneutical circle (see Chapter 3) must be invoked to explain this pattern in more detail.

The Gospel stories too have been reinterpreted and reappropriated through use of the hermeneutical circle, in dialogue with the experience of local churches in each new place and time. While on one level they are derived from events in the lives of Jesus and his first followers, on another they originate in the contexts of faith communities

of varying cultures, while also being marked by their authors' and redactors' theological outlooks. This richness of cumulative testimony to the experience of God's presence in life allows the texts to confirm and to challenge the experiences of people reflecting theologically on them in innumerable subsequent times and places. The *wirkungsgeschichtlich* approach of Ulrich Luz' four-volume commentary on Matthew (Luz 1985, 1989, 1997, 2002), in which he has collated not only historical-critical but also patristic, Reformed and Catholic commentaries on each selected Matthean text, bears eloquent testimony to these riches.

How, then, may personal experiences and the Gospel texts be connected? One way is through exploration of each as narrative.

Experience and text as narrative

The insight that experience and text are comparable in terms of genre comes from the work of literary interpreters on the narrative qualities of the Gospels and human life alike (see Chapter 1). Yet the emphasis of some on the absolute priority of the Gospels' narrative over our own runs the risk, to which Farley's work alludes, of 'losing the situation or the event by applying too quickly the usual theological categories to interpret it' (Patton 1990, 41). Such an approach, like that of a doctor who writes out a prescription before listening to the patient's account of their symptoms, does not respect the quiddity or the authority of each person's experience.

The alternative is to allow interpretative parity in Bible study to the narratives of personal experience and of the Gospels. Not only does this approach seek to do justice to the richness of lived experience discussed above, rather than distorting it by fitting it into preordained theological categories; it is also pastorally sensitive in a

local-church context. Everyone has experience to share, yet not all – even in a church group – will be sufficiently familiar with theological language and concepts to be able to make theoretical points with ease. Without deliberate valorisation of personal experience as well as of the text, many will unjustly be excluded or exclude themselves from Bible study on the false grounds of incapacity.

Yet, though the idea of dialogue between the stories of experience and those of the texts is attractive, it is also problematic. To what extent can an approach based on the universality of human nature avoid the pitfall of homogenising all experience into that which only the majority can recognise and own?

Are we speaking the same language?

Feminists and other liberationists argue the invalidity of the liberal humanist assumption that the experience of the powerful necessarily includes that of the powerless. More recently, theologies of liberation have begun to question their own assumption that the experience of all members of the specified group must be essentially similar (see for example Spelman 1990).

This insight potentially invests the Christian 'scandal of particularity' with dire consequences. If the experience of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century male Palestinian Jewish carpenter, can say nothing to anyone who is not in that set of categories, then *all* Christians are deluded, since no one fits that pattern entirely. Since, then, even his first followers must have misunderstood his message, we can fare no better. The metanarrative of universal human experience has foundered.

The argument that Christians are enabled to understand one another by membership of Christ's body would still confine the possibilities of communication to the boundaries of the church. Such a theory ignores the convenient communicative work of the Spirit outside the church, without which initial incorporation into Christ would be impossible. Moreover, apart from the notorious difficulties of establishing where the boundaries lie, it must painfully be admitted that in practice Christians frequently misinterpret one another, while non-Christians can show themselves capable of deep understanding.

Postmodern theologians such as Don Cupitt evade the problem of solipsism by denying the possibility of metanarratives altogether. Using Wittgenstein's idea of language games operating within distinct spheres of action, Cupitt allows the concept of shared human experience to operate within, though not between, different communities of interest. Thus Christians, trainspotters or Native Americans may develop and use language games corresponding to the interests of their respective communities to discuss their own experiences and life as they see it – though no one else may understand them (see discussion in Watson 1994, 124ff).

For these postmodernists, personhood has splintered into fragments; yet in this complex human society, everyone lives in more than one community at once. Potential incompatibilities between different communities – the truth-claims of Christianity and of science; the ethics of doctors and of vegetarians; conflicting claims to allegiance asserted by nationality and art – must be negotiated, both between and within human beings. This cannot be achieved without criteria of adjudication which hold good across community boundaries.

Furthermore, in a bizarre reversal of the Christian doctrine of incarnation, such theorists hold a primarily textual view of reality. The flesh has become word: truth is a matter of internal coherence rather than correspondence with external reality. Yet such a limiting view of reality disregards the necessary universality of Christian claims about God. It also ignores the limited ability of language itself, expressed in this extract from Eugene Gendlin's research on the theme of 'experiencing' (in the context of psychotherapeutic interviews), to describe experience, a description reminiscent of Ricoeur's insistence (see above) on the priority of history over speech:

The feeling, [a client] will say, was such and so all along, but he didn't know it. He only felt it. He felt it in such a unique and specific way that he could gradually, by directly referring to it, arrive at concepts for it. That is to say, the feeling was implicitly meaningful. It had a meaning which was distinguishably different from other feelings and meanings, but its meaning was felt rather than known in explicit symbols (quoted in Patton 1990, 39).

Experience as intrinsically relational

Watson proposes an alternative view, more commensurate with an 'everyday' understanding of the world, that the dialogical sharing of experience is possible:

[This understanding] coheres with certain features of our 'everyday' understanding of the world: for example, with the fact that we tend to say that, in a given situation, I and another person experience *the same reality differently*, rather than that we are so locked into our separate narrative worlds that we experience *different realities*. The former assertion expresses a belief in the relative autonomy or transcendence of the object experienced over the various experiences of it, and also coheres with the belief that our common humanity gives us a basis for a dialogue in which we might attain a consensus formed in part by the object itself [author's emphasis] (Watson 1994, 151).

Against postmodernism, Watson argues for the existence of a extra-textual reality, which various people experience in various ways, but about which, on the basis of

their 'common humanity', they may be in dialogue. Earlier, he has explained in more detail what this 'common humanity' would entail:

What is required is a relational understanding of the human person which does not sacrifice its integrity as inalienably individual, and this contrasts with a perspective in which the concept of the person is so inseparable from the notion of the self-constituting ego that the counter-concept of a linguistically-mediated relationality simply eliminates personhood and individuality (Watson 1994, 107).

Such a model of humanity as relational, while not so far removed from everyday experience as nonfoundationalist understandings of reality, also allows for the differences between people masked by liberal humanism.

This is, of course, no new idea. Ancient Israelite and African cultures, among others, stress the relational nature of humanity. It is also congruent with Christian understandings of God as Trinity and of humanity as made in God's image, and hence is particularly suitable in a church context. In her analysis of Trinitarian theology, Catherine LaCugna has isolated 'notes' of human personhood, including intersubjectivity, inclusivity and uniqueness, based on the biblical concept of people being made in God's image (LaCugna 1991, 288, 290.). Such a Trinitarian modelling of personhood allows for both relationality and diversity as aspects of human experience. Its argument for the consistency and communicability of such experience over time and space relies on the traditional Christian understanding of God as creator of humanity, rather than on any specific concept of the essential in human nature. This answers the liberationist difficulty of particularity without either rejecting the Christian metanarrative or necessitating the confinement of understanding within the church. However, LaCugna argues that, following the Trinitarian analogy, the experience of persons-in-community is enhanced over that of isolated individuals:

Person is an exponential concept. With each new relationship we 'are' in a new way, we 'exist' in a new way, we have our being from another. Since personal existence is constituted by relationship with others, we come to relationship to each new person in a fresh way, newly constituted by a new cluster of relationships, as a constantly new and evolving reality (LaCugna 1991, 291-92) [author's emphasis].

This understanding of humanity as relational also implies the usefulness of sharing experience as a hermeneutical tool. Group interpretation of biblical texts is a relatively common practice in the church context, and can also be found to some extent in academic seminar groups. In the preface to (appropriately enough)

A Community of Character, moreover, Stanley Hauerwas admits:

It is common testimony that writing is a lonely enterprise, but I have found it also requires and engenders community. I literally cannot write, and more importantly, cannot think without friends (Hauerwas 1981, ix).

A community hermeneutic of experience may be a more productive exercise than individual effort, in several respects. If hearing the stories of others' experience enlarges our own experience and empathy, on a doctrinal level, we also become aware of the amazing variety of God's created humanity, and yet of the commonality which that identity gives us all. Moreover, as LaCugna's model of personhood suggests, as we ourselves are 'reconstituted' as 'new and evolving realities' by being in relationship, our own understanding, moral sense and empathy with others can be augmented.

Ambiguous sacrament

Against the parity of experience and text for which I am arguing, it might be objected that I have made a category error: that seeking God within personal experience is a vain attempt to preempt God's prevenient self-revelation, which is beyond and

challenges all our experiential categories. However, I would agree on this point with

Jürgen Moltmann:

I do not myself see this question as a problem, because I cannot see that there is any fundamental alternative between God's revelation to human beings, and human experience of God. How is a man or woman supposed to be able to talk about God if God does not reveal himself? How are men and women supposed to be able to talk about a God of whom there is no human experience? It is only in the narrow concepts of modern philosophy that 'revelation' and 'experience' are antitheses (Moltmann 1992, 6).

Traditional Christian doctrines of God's self-revelation – God's creation of the universe, the incarnation of God into a human life, the Spirit encountered through prophetic word and deed *in media res* – may be invoked to argue for the significance of everyday experience as a locus of revelatory encounter. This emphasis on the discernment of God in the apparently ordinary is also paralleled in the biblical texts themselves.

Though the Bible gives the sacral life of the people of Israel and the Christian church its due, the texts testify equally to God's interest in, and self-revelation through, the mundane matters of relationships and enmities, politics and war and the natural world. The whole corpus of Torah argues the intimate connection, mediated by communal ritual and ethic, between God and everyday living. Similarly Jesus' use of parabolic language shockingly suggests the intangible nature of God's kingdom by means of the common things of life, seen in a fresh way.

Jesus' life and death must be seen in political and economic as well as 'spiritual' terms: salvific events of personal and universal import, undergone by God for the sake of God's world, they are simultaneously sociopolitical realities experienced by a first-century Palestinian Jew and his followers. Nor, on the Christian view, is the

significance of Jesus diminished by these mundane categories of understanding. On the contrary, a Christian theology unconnected with everyday experience has missed the point that God chose to experience an ordinary life – which makes everyday experience far from ordinary.

This does not imply that the universe reflects its creator in an uncomplicated fashion, any more than history can unambiguously be read from the Gospel texts. Experience includes the dead child and the earthquake as well as the rainbow and the rose. The Bible, particularly in the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, testifies to the mixed nature of human experience as well as the reality and destructiveness of human finitude and sin – another Christian doctrine. This leads to a necessarily critical appraisal of personal experience as well as of the texts.

As Farley warns, reductionistic views of personal experience can also lead to the over-simplification of dogmatism. Alienated from the theological significance of their own experience, people may look to experts, whether the magisterium or the Academy, to teach them the 'correct' way to understand their lives as well as the texts. Contrariwise, 'my experience' may become a ruling hermeneutical principle operating to stifle dissent (see further on misinterpretation in Appendix I).

Experience, then, is a mixed blessing as a hermeneutical tool. On the positive side, it reenfranchises the whole body of Christ in its theological capacity. Everyone can be an expert witness on their own life, and the story of how God has been revealed within it. Making sense of the ambiguity of everyday experience is not easy and, like the Gospel texts, it can be misinterpreted. However, Christianity teaches that it is precisely within such ambiguity that, in Pascal's dictum, the 'God of Abraham,

God of Isaac, God of Jacob' as opposed to the 'God of the philosophers and scholars' is to be encountered.

Moreover, the alternative – for Christians to try *not* to use their life-experience when interpreting the Gospel texts – is impossible. The narrative framework by means of which human beings interpret the whole of their lives will not vanish just because they are studying the Bible. Why, indeed, should it *not* be interrogated on matters of deepest interest to the very interpreters who take it as a guide for faith and conduct? Here we return to the possibility of perspectival history.

Why both history and experience?

'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (Hartley 1953).

In its original context this quotation refers to a distance of mere decades separating the narrator in L.P Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* from his remembered childhood. How much greater is the chronological gulf separating Christians today from the Gospels' subjects, authors and original readers, a gulf mirrored by that between academic historical-critical and local-church devotional interpretation of the Bible.

Christians today are anthropological 'outsiders' to the Gospels, looking in on a multiplicity of different cultures and liable to misunderstand their texts, even if the terms used appear familiar. In Ricoeur's terms, the Gospel past is truly Other (see his analysis of the past as Same, Other and Analogue discussed in Chapter 3). Yet that form of interpretation which relies solely on the texts' original meaning, heedless of the contemporary context, can be of little relevance in the lives of Christians today, seeking to connect the texts and their own experience.

In some ways, moreover, local-church communities are anthropological 'insiders' to these texts. They draw on a tradition to which the texts, first developed by their ancestors in the faith – also members of local-church communities – bear witness. It is to this dynamic Gadamer appeals when he relies on the power of tradition to bridge the gap between then and now (see Chapter 3). In Ricoeur's terms, this understanding claims the past as Same, as our own past. Yet the danger in this form of interpretation lies in bracketing the texts' historical dimensions and assuming that our experience is sufficient to interpret the Gospels on its own.

However, experience and history need not be opposed in this fashion. Instead, a dialectical balance may be struck, comprehending the ways in which the past is both Same and Other. Using Ricoeur's resolution of this tension – the past as Analogue – history and experience may be seen as not identical, yet related, and for this reason suitable for interpreting one another. The hermeneutical circle which inevitably forms between interpreter and text/event interpreted, known from both biblical studies and practical theology, presents itself as a suitable model for such a dialogue, resulting in the model of Bible study I call community hermeneutics.

The theoretical lineage and the practical outworking of this model are the subject of Chapter 3.

3. The model constructed: community hermeneutics justified as a method of Bible study

This chapter, describing the theory behind the model of Bible study used in my fieldwork, begins from Gadamer's contention that within a community tradition can authoritatively bridge the gap between past and present: the consciousness of being affected by history allows fusion between the interpretative horizons of text and reader. However, Gadamer makes no provision for judging between differences in interpretation, over-optimistically relying on a universal prior understanding. As well as this unwarranted assumption of the ease of communication, Habermas critiques Gadamer's uncritical use of tradition, revealing the distortion of communication produced by socio-economic factors masked by Gadamer's notion of universal understanding. Mediating between the two, Ricoeur supplements Gadamer's use of tradition with four critical strategies. The decontextualisation of a text fixed in writing allows for subsequent reappropriation. Close historical-critical study of the text allows its 'ideal meaning' (a label unrelated to the distinction between realism and idealism) to give boundaries to interpretation. Consideration of the 'world in front of the text', the text's possible alternative reality, critiques our self-understanding. This results in an appropriation of the text in the form of transformed praxis. The last interpretative step to complete the circle, the experience resulting from praxis, is supplied by the work of Paulo Freire, offering dialogical education to adults which begins from their own experience. The cycle of community hermeneutics on which my fieldwork is based – experience, close study, connection, action – is assembled from these components.

The hermeneutical circle

Reflecting on the process of research, the historian Christopher Browning gives a clear description of the dynamics of interpretation, circling between researcher and researched:

It is the concerns and unanswered questions of historians that from the beginning will cause them to screen out some testimony as irrelevant, ponder and weigh other testimony for its importance, and immediately seize upon yet other testimony as obviously crucial... Furthermore, even if the moral stance and concerns of the historian undertaking the research are already shaped, they too can change under the impact of the research itself. There is a constant dialectical interaction between what the historian brings to the research and how the research affects the historian (Browning 1992, 31).

The hermeneutical circle, that 'constant dialectical interaction' between interpreted and interpreter, has a long theoretical lineage in textual interpretation via Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Bultmann to the work of Gadamer (1979), on which I shall focus in this discussion. It also has a history of interpreting life events via the Freirean (1997) model of adult education, from which the pastoral circle (see Green 1990, Ballard and Pritchard 1996) has been developed. This dual heritage makes it peculiarly suitable as a vehicle to bridge the practical context of personal experience in church congregations and the theoretical context of historical-critical textual analysis. This chapter, therefore, will delineate the influences shaping that version of the hermeneutical circle used in community hermeneutics, the method of Bible study used in my fieldwork, bringing both history and personal experience to bear on the Gospel texts.

I shall use Ricoeur's hermeneutical work as a major theoretical dialogue partner, for three reasons. Firstly, his work on the narrative nature and the revelatory capacity of history has already undergirded my argument in Chapter 2. Secondly, his essay

'Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology' (1981b) mediates between two crucial elements of community hermeneutics: Hans-Georg Gadamer's use of tradition and Jürgen Habermas' use of ideological critique. Thirdly, Ricoeur's own interpretative dynamic, repeated in differing forms through his works, informs much of the cycle of community hermeneutics. However, in order to make sense of Ricoeur's own hermeneutical viewpoint it is first necessary to describe and critique those on which he builds.

Gadamer's circle

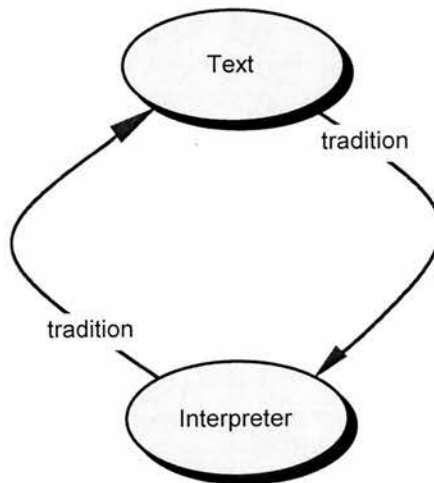
Gadamer describes the hermeneutical circle (see Fig. 1) in the following terms:

The circle... is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves (Gadamer 1979, 261).

His approach rehabilitates the ideas of prejudice, authority and tradition discredited by thinkers of the Enlightenment, whose guiding light was reason. Not all prejudices are ill-founded, he argues; authority is not necessarily to be linked with domination and violence, but may be recognised as valid; moreover, tradition may be seen as such an appropriate authority (Ricoeur 1981b, 72).

The tradition inherited from our ancestors, produced by the current community as it 'participate[s] in the evolution of tradition' and passed on to subsequent generations, is thus able to bridge the ditch dug by 'scientific' historical criticism (see Chapter 2)

FIG. 1: GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE



between historical texts and the present. As Gadamer explains: 'Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted' (Gadamer 1979, 264).

He argues that, like every other hermeneutic, a moment of historical criticism is itself rooted in history:

True historical thinking must take account of its own historicity. Only then will it not chase the phantom of an historical object which is the object of progressive research, but learn to see in the object the counterpart of itself and hence understand both. The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding (Gadamer 1979, 267).

His concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* or effective history acknowledges the effect of the temporal distance between the texts and ourselves, the distance of the interpretative horizon of the text from our own, on research. Thus Gadamer defines *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, our consciousness of being affected by history, as 'primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation' (Gadamer 1979, 268).

This very consciousness is the means by which the interpretative horizons of text and reader may be fused in understanding.

This exposition of the hermeneutical circle between text and interpreter is initially attractive for a community hermeneutic. In a faith context it is both impossible and undesirable to step into interpretation free of prejudice, given the origin of the scriptural texts with past generations of Christians who both formed and were formed by them, as well as the texts' influence on the formation of the present generation.

This constant dialogue between community and text, text and community is in fact incumbent upon a faith community whose identity continues to be formed through the ongoing evolution of tradition. Gadamer's stress on the validity of the

continuing tradition of the church is thus a necessary corrective to the Enlightenment historical-critical approach, within which traditional church understandings of the biblical texts would be doubted on grounds of provenance alone (see for example Funk et al. 1993, 24).

Yet how could his hermeneutic apply to a concrete situation? Firstly, how feasible – or desirable – would be the return, which Gadamer appears to advocate, to an unquestioning acceptance of both past tradition and present authority in the contemporary local church? In these ecumenical days, *which* church tradition and *whose* authority would be universally acknowledged? By what – and whose – criteria, then, could the normativity of traditional and authoritative interpretation be assessed, and how much would power relationships within and beyond the church influence such decisions? Though for Gadamer the recognition of authority is 'always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true' (Gadamer 1979, 249), he does not suggest in practice how this may be done.

Secondly, his dictum concerning shifts of understanding from one generation to another: 'It is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all' (Gadamer 1979, 264) underestimates the impact which differences of interpretation may make on a community. Extending his argument, not only future but also present generations, in different cultural and socio-economic circumstances, will read the texts differently, depending upon their various interpretative horizons. Yet Gadamer's theory does not consider how to deal with a plurality of synchronic interpretations. Instead, based on his understanding of language, he optimistically

posits a universal *tragendes Einverständnis* (prior agreement) which underlies dialogue prior to any misunderstanding. Ricoeur describes this posited universality of dialogical language as 'absolutely fundamental' to Gadamer's thought (Ricoeur 1981b, 77), but calls it into question. Is dialogue not, rather, he asks, a more nuanced phenomenon: 'enveloping both a blindness with respect to the real conditions of human communication, as well as a hope for a communication without restriction and constraint' (Ricoeur 1981b, 78)?

Thirdly, it is also significant that Gadamer's view of application ends with that 'fusion of horizons' which is provisional understanding, rather than with any practical outworkings of interpretation:

All reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. He belongs to the text that he is reading. It will always happen that the line of meaning that is revealed to him as he reads it necessarily breaks off in an open indefiniteness (Gadamer 1979, 304).

Habermas' critique

These objections point up a contrast between Gadamer's views and those of Habermas, a critical theorist who has taken issue with Gadamer's whole hermeneutical approach. (For a summary of the history of their debate, see Ricoeur 1981b, 299.) According to Ricoeur's analysis, in general Habermas opposes Gadamer's use of tradition with his own concept of interest. Instead of Gadamer's use of the hermeneutical human sciences, based upon the authority of tradition, Habermas appeals to the critical social sciences, which have an interest in the individual's emancipation from socio-economic powerlessness. Instead of Gadamer's idea of misunderstanding, based on human finitude, Habermas posits ideology, which systematically and deliberately distorts communication. Instead of

Gadamer's view of dialogue as a present ontic reality, Habermas sees the possibility of clear communication in an eschatological light (Ricoeur 1981b, 78). Habermas' critique of Gadamer's hermeneutic, then, centres on Gadamer's uncritical use of tradition and his unwarranted assumption of the ease of communication.

As Ricoeur explains,

For Habermas, the principal flaw of Gadamer's account is to have ontologised hermeneutics; by that he means its insistence on understanding or accord, as if the consensus which preceded us were something constitutive, something given in being (Ricoeur 1981b, 86).

For Habermas, the perfect, unimpeded communication characterising correct interpretation is a teleological possibility, not a present ontological reality. His critique of ideology reveals the distortion of communication masked by Gadamer's notion of universal understanding by taking the socio-economic factors of labour and power, often invisible within a particular tradition (as their absence from Gadamer's hermeneutic illustrates), into account.

Using psychoanalysis as a parallel, Habermas speaks of the illusion, projection and rationalisation which cloak imbalances of power, distorting communication, as well as the violent consequences of such imbalances (Ricoeur 1981b, 84). He uses ideology critique to challenge such distortion, refusing to base communication on the false premise of 'a convergence of traditions that does not exist... a past which is also the place of false consciousness', as Ricoeur phrases it (Ricoeur 1981b, 87).

Habermas' critique of Gadamer's position is cogent (especially given the oppressive attitudes and actions which have been and are being authorised by Christian tradition), and echoes the questions posed above concerning Gadamer's uncritical acceptance of tradition and authority. Moreover, Habermas' analysis of the interests

with which interpreters come to dialogue (Ricoeur 1981b, 80) – instrumental (connected with the 'hard' sciences), practical (connected with the 'historical-hermeneutical' sciences) and emancipatory (connected with the critical social sciences) – resonates with the approaches of historical-critical, literary and liberationist scholars. Habermas' emancipatory interest even takes interpretation a stage further than the understanding which is the goal of Gadamer's application: into practice.

However, the practical implications of Habermas' own stance are less clear. In order to dispel the false consciousness of ideology, he suggests – continuing the psychoanalytic parallel – that an explanation of the ideological distortion of tradition should become a discrete part of the process of understanding. Ricoeur comments that Habermas does not describe how such a psychoanalytical scheme could validly be 'transposed onto the plane of ideology' (Ricoeur 1981b, 85). Habermas' approach is so theoretical, indeed, that its consequences for the interpretation of a biblical text, let alone its use in the context of a local church community, are hard to assess. Later in this chapter we will see, with reference to the work of Paulo Freire, how ideological critique may practically inform community hermeneutics. First, however, I shall consider Ricoeur's mediatory approach between Habermas and Gadamer, demonstrated in his 1981 essay 'Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology'.

Ricoeur's mediation

Ricoeur does not claim to be able to reconcile these two theorists, who begin from very different presuppositions, in one grand theory of interpretation (Ricoeur 1981b, 87). However, his tempering of tradition with criticism is

instructive. Ricoeur considers that, by its nature, 'The hermeneutical experience itself discourages the recognition of any critical instance' (Ricoeur 1981b, 90).

In its reclamation of the continuity of tradition as a crucial aspect of belonging to an interpretative tradition, then, Gadamer's hermeneutics reacts against the distancing and objectifying stance of criticism. However, Ricoeur suggests that, in the context of textual interpretation, belonging to tradition and distancing oneself from it may profitably be related dialectically. To this end, he offers four critical strategies to supplement Gadamer's hermeneutic of tradition. Discussion of these, however, must be preceded by a brief excursus on the trajectory of Ricoeur's own hermeneutical thought through both fiction and history.

In 'Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology', Ricoeur's focus is on fictional rather than historical texts. This is consonant with his earlier work, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, on the three developmental stages of understanding myth: a 'first naïveté' leading, via an intermediate stage of criticism, to a 'second naïveté' 'in and through criticism' (Ricoeur 1967, 351). In Volume 1 of his later *Time and Narrative* he discusses a similar threefold textual dynamic of mimesis (emplotment):

- Mimesis (1) is the prefigurative grounding of plot in the reader's pre-understanding of the world of action outside the text (Ricoeur 1984b, 54f)
- Mimesis (2) is the configurative emplotment of fiction mediating between disparate events/factors and the story (Ricoeur 1984b, 64f)
- Mimesis (3) is the reconfigurative application via the text/reader interaction, leading to reference and praxis in the world outside the text (Ricoeur 1984b, 70f)

At this point, however, Ricoeur is engaging with both history and fiction, each part of the wider spectrum of narrative (Ricoeur 1984b, 91; see also Chapter 2). In Volume 3 of the same work, moreover, Ricoeur uses a similar dynamic on history when he analyses 'the past' under three headings: the Same, the Other and the

Analogue (Ricoeur 1988, 142f), an idea first sketched out in an earlier lecture (Ricoeur 1984a). According to Ricoeur, we can understand the past as Same by means of a posited universality of human nature. R.G. Collingwood's concept of the historical imagination takes Carr's emphasis on the ability of historians to discern what is truly historical one stage further, relying on the feasibility of properly trained historians' being able to think the thoughts of historical persons after them, and in this manner comprehending their actions:

The web of imaginative construction... serves as the touchstone by which we decide whether alleged facts are genuine. Suetonius tells me that Nero at one time intended to evacuate Britain. I reject his statement, not because any better authority flatly contradicts it, for of course none does; but because my reconstruction of Nero's policy based on Tacitus will not allow me to think that Suetonius is right (Collingwood 1961, 244-45).

It may be objected that even in the present, let alone in the past, total empathy is not possible, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz bears witness (Geertz 1993a, 58).

Going to the other extreme, then, we can understand the past as Other, using the argument of cultural relativity (for a biblical version of this see Nineham 1990) to stress its completely alien nature. Yet this understanding cloaks the temporal rather than geographical nature of our distance from the past, and ignores the survival of traces of the past in the present. Alternatively, we can understand the past as

Analogue, seeing the goal of history writing as narration 'in the same manner as' (Ranke's *wie*) – as opposed to 'identical with' – how events actually occurred.

At this stage, Ricoeur can stress both the referential and the analogical aspects of written history:

When we want to indicate the difference between fiction and history, we inevitably refer to the idea of a certain correspondence between our narrative and what really happened. At the same time, we are well aware that this reconstruction is a different construction of the course of events narrated (Ricoeur 1988, 151-52).

Keeping this nuanced treatment of the spectrum of historical texts in mind, I return to Ricoeur's treatment of fictional texts in 'Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology'.

Four critical supplements to tradition

Firstly, he reframes the decontextualisation caused by a text being fixed in writing – 'in which [Gadamer's] hermeneutics tends to see a sort of ontological fall from grace' (Ricoeur 1981b, 91). Ricoeur himself sees this fixing rather as a positive emancipation of the 'matter of the text' (see below) from the original authorial intention, cultural context and addressees.

To the historical-critical scholar, orientated to consideration of precisely such themes, this move may sound drastic. Yet, practically speaking, such decontextualisation is inherent in the nature of a written text. While an author speaks, her speech is open to clarification and amendment. Once it is written down, in spite of authorial intention, demonstrated through careful use of wording and punctuation, she has lost control of its meaning – as any student defending a wrong answer by pleading right intentions will discover (Schneiders 1999, 143). Gadamer's concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* shows us that the original meaning of a text in a particular time and place is only the beginning of its trajectory of meaning. This meaning will inevitably expand as the text is continually recontextualised, both synchronically and diachronically. Such emancipation is inevitable, whether the text is a Gospel or one of Shakespeare's plays (Schneiders 1999, 144), if it is to continue to communicate with new readers. However, a brake is put on this expansion of meaning by Ricoeur's next critical move: close study of the text in its own right.

As well as understanding, Ricoeur argues, hermeneutics legitimately involves explanation. He rehabilitates this term from the 'explaining away', reductionist implications against which Gadamer and his hermeneutical predecessors had argued. On the contrary, Ricoeur considers that explanatory determination of the 'ideal meaning' of a text is a necessary step towards understanding. Sandra Schneiders explains Ricoeur's concept of a textual 'ideal meaning' by reference to the sport of tennis, defined by a particular (ideal) set of rules. Every game of tennis will vary, depending on the players and other factors; yet in certain crucial aspects all games of tennis resemble one another. Moreover, by measurement against this ideal meaning of tennis, some games can be adjudged better than others (Schneiders 1999, xxxiii).

Ricoeur uses 'ideal meaning' to give the text critical distance from its interpreters: 'It is necessary to have gone as far as possible along the route of objectification... before one can claim to "understand" the text in terms of the "matter" which speaks therefrom' (Ricoeur 1981b, 93). Since here he is dealing with fiction, specifically with myth and folklore, he suggests that, in a manner consonant with Habermas' psychoanalytic focus (Ricoeur 1981b, 92-93), both sense and reference of a text can be described by a semantic analysis of its structure (Ricoeur 1981b, 160-61).

Schneiders, however, using Ricoeur's methodology to study the Gospels, which have been established as written history (see Chapter 2), considers that

[h]istorical methods will dominate in the exegetical moment in which the issue is the establishment of the ideal meaning of the text: what the text is about (reference) and what the text says about the referent (sense) (Schneiders 1999, 153-54).

Accordingly, Schneiders' definition of 'ideal meaning' for the Gospels covers a wider range of interlinking factors (which, incidentally, presuppose the prior work of

textual criticism having produced the best possible version of the text),

as she explains:

By 'ideal meaning' I mean not a textual semantic content but a certain dynamic structure in the text that derives from the confluence of three factors: (a) the dialectic between sense and reference... by which the text says something intelligible about something (even if what it says is false); (b) the genre in which the intelligible utterance is expressed and by which it is shaped; (c) the personal style of the author (Schneiders 1999, xxxii).

Here it is vital to keep in mind various levels of sense and reference. 'What the text says', its sense, can be established, Schneiders argues, by the use of '[t]he traditional methods of historical critical exegesis supplemented by structuralist analysis based on semiotics' (Schneiders 1999, 146-47). This may be seen as overly optimistic, considering continuing scholarly conflict over the sense of many biblical texts, but it may stand as a worthy goal of interpretation, if not always a realised one.

Reference, 'what the text is talking about' or its truth-claim, is more complicated.

A Gospel text points inward to its own subject matter – the life of Jesus. By the truth-claims which it makes about this life, it also points outward to the world of the reader. Yet 'the' reader of the Gospels is in fact legion, from the 'implied reader' in the author's mind, and the second-generation Christians for whose communities the texts were first compiled, to every subsequent 'real reader', synchronically and diachronically. Since the use of historical-critical methods produces reconstructions both of the text's original reference (Jesus and his disciples) and of the communities in which the Gospel texts originated, Ricoeur's 'ideal meaning' turns out to be analogous to Brown's 'literal meaning' (see Chapter 1). These successive layers of reference constitute the beginnings of a hermeneutical trajectory through the centuries towards a church community interpreting the Gospels as we have them

now, 'where meaning is no longer simply ideal meaning but becomes an event of meaning achieved in appropriation or application' (Schneiders 1999, 148).

Such a comprehensive explanation, using source, form and redaction criticism to delineate both the sense and the reference of the Gospel texts, facilitates Ricoeur's next move: consideration of the 'matter of the text'. This phrase, used by Gadamer, is equivalent to Ricoeur's own 'world in front of the text': the world projected by the Gospel narratives, into which their interpreters are drawn. As Schneiders clarifies,

It is important to realize that the 'world the text projects' is not the imaginative, fictional world of the work, for example... the inn to which the Good Samaritan took the victim of the robbers. The fiction is the vehicle that carries the reader into a possible alternative reality (Schneiders 1999, 167).

This capacity of the Gospels gives interpreters of the text the subversive power to re-imagine the world of their own tradition and experience other than it is: a world in which, rather than ignoring a racially despised victim of mugging, one goes to his aid. Ricoeur explains, 'The power of the text to open a dimension of reality implies in principle a recourse against any given reality and thereby the possibility of a critique of the real' (Ricoeur 1981b, 93). As Schneiders helpfully says, entering into the world in front of the text may be compared, in New Testament terms, with living in the Spirit rather than in the flesh, or being born from above rather than from below (Schneiders 1999, 168).

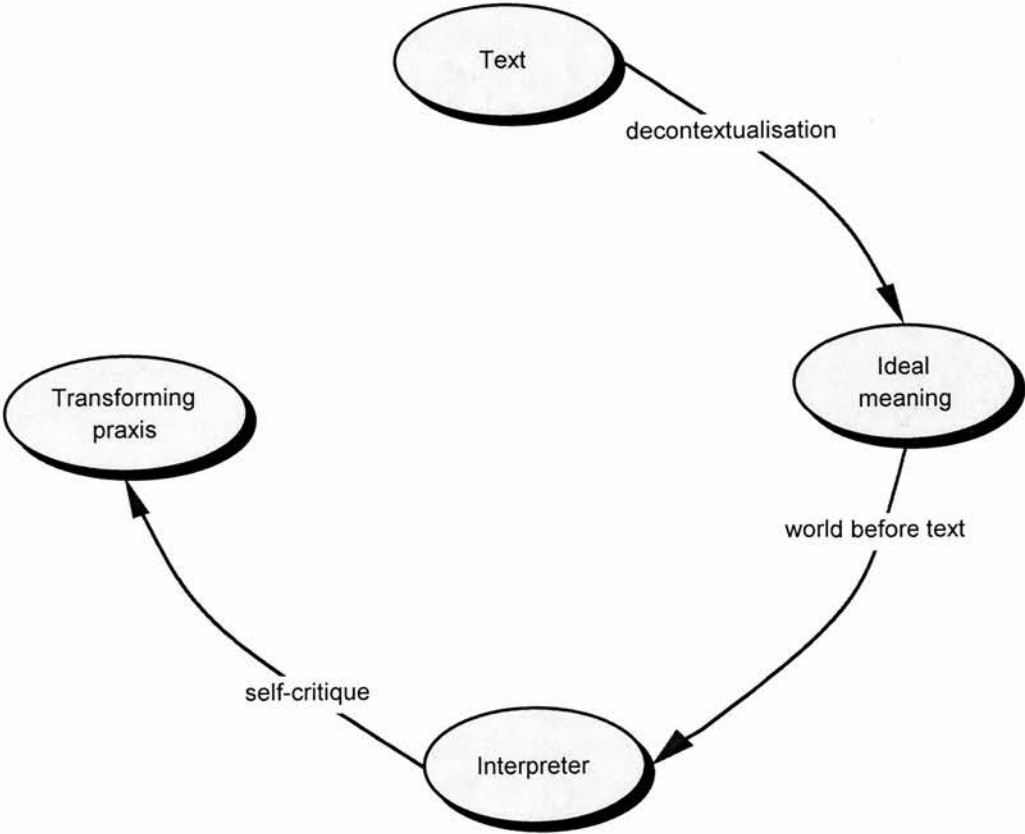
The last stage of Ricoeur's textual dynamic allows its readers' own self-critique, a meta-hermeneutical unmasking of false consciousness, to be catalysed by the challenge of the world in front of the text (Ricoeur 1981b, 94). Here again, Schneiders expands on Ricoeur's approach, raising the problem of ideological distortion, and hence the strategy of ideology critique, as issues concerning not only

the reader but also the text itself. To do this she argues that 'The Bible was produced and has been interpreted almost exclusively by the "historical winners," who have, deliberately or inadvertently, made history and interpretation serve their interests at the expense of the "historical losers"' (Schneiders 1999, 120).

Rather than an 'all or nothing' approach which must choose between seeing the texts as totally normative or as utterly irrelevant, Schneiders suggests 'a genuine dialogue with the text that, like all dialogue, not only permits but demands development of both the interpreter and the text' (Schneiders 1999, 175). Such an approach, already implicit in the very idea of the hermeneutical circle and made explicit by Ricoeur's use of Habermas' ideology critique, may indeed lead to the praxis which signals successful recontextualisation of the text within the local church context. Schneiders' notion of dialogue, moreover, is more flexible than Watson's division of the texts into law and grace (see Chapter 1), allowing for continually renegotiated understandings of both life and text on further rereading.

The overall dynamic of decontextualisation-recontextualisation expressed in Ricoeur's modification of Gadamer's hermeneutics (Ricoeur 1981b, 91) is characteristic of his hermeneutical approach as a whole (see Fig. 2). It mirrors the move from first to second naïveté, from mimesis (1) to mimesis (3), from past as Same to past as Analogue, already considered. Such a dynamic may be relevant to biblical interpretation in the local church.

FIG. 2: RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE



Application to local-church interpretation

In the current context of church life (see Chapter 1), the absence of historical-critical input has left many Christians in a somewhat uneasy state of 'first naïveté'; thinking, for example, that the Gospels should be understood in their totality as literal reportage. The Gospel stories may well be interpreted with more sophistication by a preacher who enjoys a narrative-theological state of second naïveté, having worked through the Gospels' historical-critical composition to their canonical and current significance. However, without public validation of the intermediate, critical stage, the preacher's auditors may be tempted either to write the Gospels off as irrelevant or to perform crude correlations between life and text which would not be validated by examination of its ideal meaning. Thus a community hermeneutic has the potential to lead its practitioners from 'first naïveté', which they can no longer with integrity hold, via the distancing effect of historical criticism, into 'second naïveté', which is still capable of nourishing faith (Schneiders 1999, 169), as well as generating transformative action.

Yet in one major respect Ricoeur's textual dynamic is incomplete. In his model, the text handed down by tradition is decontextualised from its traditional understanding via close attention given to explanation of the sense and reference of the text by means of historical criticism. By being invited into the 'world before the text' the interpreter is offered an opportunity for both self-critique and criticism of society in the light of the text – and vice versa – from which transformative praxis can follow. Yet how can the hermeneutical circle be completed, with praxis feeding back into the next round of textual criticism, if not via the interpreter's personal experience? It follows that experience, understood like history to be a hermeneutical tool

(see Chapter 2), must complete the hermeneutical circle. Here the ideology critique of Paulo Freire, which gives primacy to experience, is instructive: to this I now turn.

Experience: the missing step

Ironically, for a project which builds on Marx' dictum: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it' (quoted in Ricoeur 1981b, 87), Habermas' ideology critique stops short before exploring the practical consequences of his form of interpretation. However, a different model of ideology critique, developed by Paulo Freire, has been extensively trialled in practice.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Freire began to develop techniques of adult literacy, working with Brazilian peasants, which took learners as well as teachers seriously. In a typical Freirean meeting, initial discussion among participants, generated by posters or slide projections about agricultural life, would last about three-quarters of an hour. Leaders, listening in rather than leading this discussion, would note the 'generative words' cropping up, concepts which characterised the basic realities of people's lives. They would choose some of these words which were also linguistically basic. These would be used as a foundation for teaching the skills of reading and writing in a way meaningful to their audience. Thus a 'codification' of the peasants' lives offered by the visual materials was 'decoded' by the participants, through dialogue on an equal footing with the leader (Berryman 1987, 35).

Freire described the traditional methods of education, against which his work reacted, as based on a 'banking' model (his own terminology):

[Banking] education... becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher

issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat... in the last analysis, it is men [sic] themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, men cannot be truly human (Freire 1974b, 58).

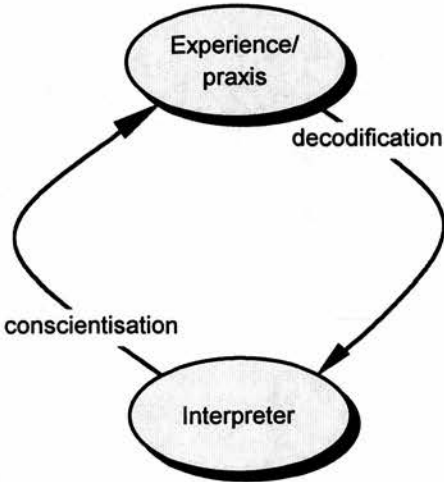
Freire understood 'banking' education to be part of society's conditioning of oppressed people to believe that their present situation of oppression is necessary and unalterable. Dialogic education, in contrast, develops in its participants critical consciousness which can give hope for societal transformation (Allman 1988, 97). People are enabled by the teacher's question-posing methods to learn from experience collaboratively, and to use that learning transformatively.

Much of the hermeneutical cycle of experiential learning Freire used can be paralleled in the theoretical models of Lewin, Dewey or Piaget (Kolb 1984, 138f). Freire, however, stressed the praxis-orientated nature of his work; praxis understood as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to change it' (Freire, 1974b, 36). Teaching workers to read and write was not Freire's fundamental goal. Rather, a deliberately political aim underlay his methods:

The central aim [of Freire's work] can be summed up in the idea of 'conscientisation' (*conscientizacao*), that is, the development in the learners of a critical understanding of society and an awareness of their capacity to change society. The development of this consciousness opens up the possibility of people liberating themselves by changing the social structures which de-humanise them and by building a new society (Youngman 1986, 155).

Though Freire himself later disowned the term *conscientizacao* when right-wing educators also took it up, the liberative intent of his work remained (see Fig. 3). In the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by Freire, Catholic church workers began to develop courses to communicate the Gospel to the poor of Latin America (see Chapter 1). Liberationist hermeneutics had begun.

FIG. 3: FREIRE'S HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE



Freire's interpretative methods are not without their critics. To start with, like both Habermas' thought and the liberation theology catalysed by his own approach, his understanding of the world as it is and as it could be owes much to Marxist analysis. From a Christian viewpoint this debt to Marx could be considered problematic. The liberation theologian Clodovis Boff argues, however, that given experience of an unjust society, a dialogue between Christianity and Marxism is bound to take place:

When dealing with the poor and the oppressed, and seeking their liberation, how could anyone hope to avoid an encounter with Marxist groups (in the concrete struggle) and Marxist theory (on the level of reflection)? (Boff 1996, 13)

If some level of interaction with Marxism is inevitable when dealing with themes of oppression and poverty, there is a wide spectrum of opinion among liberationists on how far it is compatible with Christianity. Some, such as Boff, argue that Marxist analysis should be used instrumentally, for the sake of the poor rather than for its own sake, and critically, 'set against the broader horizon of faith' (Boff 1996, 13). Others, such as Miranda (1980) or Kee (1986) are more downright in their support of Marx, arguing that his denunciation of the idolisation of wealth is completely compatible with that of Jesus.

Even if one accepts Marx' critique of society in his time, it might be argued, in the wake of the collapse of Communism as a system of government in Eastern Europe, that his thought is passé. Writing in 1991, Pablo Richard alluded to the belief then current (see Fukuyama 1992) that 'We are... living the End of History, the final triumph of capitalism' (Richard 1994, 245). However, Richard rebuts the allegation that Marxist thought must die with Communism by pointing out that

[t]his triumphalism and this expectation of the oppressors brutally flies in the face of the reality of poverty, misery, and oppression that continues to dominate a huge

majority of the human race. The historic rationale for LT [Liberation Theology] is still in place. As long as the scandal of poverty and oppression exists – while there are Christians who live and reflect their faith critically in the struggles for justice and life – there will be a liberation theology (Richard 1994, 245).

To this extent the Marxist analysis of society remains cogent. It will be considered below, however, to what extent such an analysis may restrict or distort textual interpretation.

Freire's writings have also been subjected to criticism from liberationists, since Freirean educators also have their own agendas, and the transparency of their problem-posing methods cannot therefore be assumed. Freire originally used a clear-cut concept of class oppression as his major tool for the analysis of society and the conscientisation of his literacy groups within a relatively homogenous society. Subsequent work (for example Althaus-Reid 2000, 48), however, has pointed out the significance of other factors of oppression, such as race and gender, for his model. Other contextual differences, such as that between rural and urban areas, must also be taken into account. These valid points, however, tend to extend rather than to invalidate Freire's approach.

A third potential difficulty arises in the attempt to transfer Freire's work from Latin America to Britain. Paula Allman notes, 'Freire stresses that methods must be worked out specifically in accord with the cultural and historical context in which they are to be used' (Allman 1988, 95). How legitimate, then, is the attempt to transfer his methods to a completely different context? Can there be parallels between the learning processes of illiterate Brazilian peasants and those of largely middle-class British churchgoers? At first sight, very few. However, as Norman

Todd comments, paralleling Segundo's differentiation of first- and second-level learning (see Chapter 1),

The great problem for most people in our society is that they think they are literate because they can read and write. They are not literate in the way Freire means because their 'literacy' is not linked with praxis (Todd et al. 1987, 118).

Taking this comparison seriously, Freire's method for linking literacy with cultural competence may, after all, have relevance in the British context. It may be argued that adults in British churches, though in general functionally literate, are unable to read the signs of their own lives in conjunction with those of the Bible, in order to address those connections between faith and life expressed by the transformatory concept of praxis. In that case, Freire's methods of addressing the 'faith-illiteracy' of Christian adults in Britain may arguably inform community hermeneutics.

The genesis of 'community hermeneutics'

How do the views of interpretation held by Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur and Freire interact with each other to form 'community hermeneutics', the model of Bible study used in my fieldwork? This may best be shown by moving through the cycle of community hermeneutics, stage by stage. It consists of four hermeneutical moves, focussing on experience, historical-critical study, connection and action.

- The first move is to elicit everyday *experience* of the participants focussed on a problematic theme or question, chosen (preferably by the group) to be of relevance to the group, and decoded through dialogue to give a picture of the theme's structure and relevance in the life of the group.

Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition authorises a group of interpreters within the context of a local church to hold a legitimate prejudice concerning the Gospels as

revelatory texts (see Schneiders 1999), handed down by previous generations of the faith community, and speaking of the God whom Christians worship. The interpretative process begins in Freirean fashion with a discussion using the group's own experience (defended as a hermeneutical tool in Chapter 2) for subject matter, and focussed on a theme of their choosing. This 'reading' of experience may initially be a naïve one, though Freire's question-posing method is designed to help the group to look more deeply into their own experience, to discern deeper patterns within the ordinariness of life. Putting experience first in the hermeneutical circle, however, is also akin to Ricoeur's decontextualising the biblical text from questions of authorship and original context. It allows understanding of the chosen theme to be elicited, untrammelled by expectations that what one 'ought' as a good Christian to believe or experience is contained within the texts (see my description of conservative Relating hermeneutics in Chapter 6). The prior declaration of interests is also designed to decrease the possibility of unconscious bias influencing participants' subsequent textual interpretation (see below).

- The second move is to take a biblical passage resonating with this facet of experience, and analyse it using *historical-critical* methods, introduced to the group using the analogy of newspapers (see Appendix II). The object is to discern both the concerns of those second-generation Christian communities in which the Gospels were composed and the Gospel-writers' theological views, using source, form and redaction criticism as well as intertextual links from the Hebrew Bible as appropriate. These methods provide sense and reference for the passage's meaning, informing the 'ideal meaning' of the passage discussed by Ricoeur and Schneiders.

Some understanding of the participants' life-situation having been attained, a distancing move of explanation is interposed, using Ricoeur's critical close reading, to avoid the fallacy of assuming an unproblematic identity between the Christian community generating the text and that reading it. Having in the first move decontextualised the theme of discussion from the text, this move takes seriously history as Other, distanced also from our own experience. It is achieved through critical close reading of the text. However, it should also be noted that complete distancing of the text from our own circumstances would only be possible for someone for whom the texts had no personal significance. In practice, explanation of the textual differences found will resonate with the interpreters' interests already elicited, and the history thus reconstructed will be perspectival.

- The third move is to find out to what extent one can *connect* the group's own experience with that of the texts, the Gospel writers and their communities.

This move invites interpreters into Ricoeur's world 'in front of the text'.

Recontextualising the text in the context of the group's own experience, possibilities inspired by the text of the 'real' world becoming other and better than it is may be explored. The text may critique its interpreters, challenging their false consciousness and inviting transformatory change. However, through the use of their experience, participants may reciprocally use a hermeneutic of suspicion to challenge distorting ideologies to be found within the text.

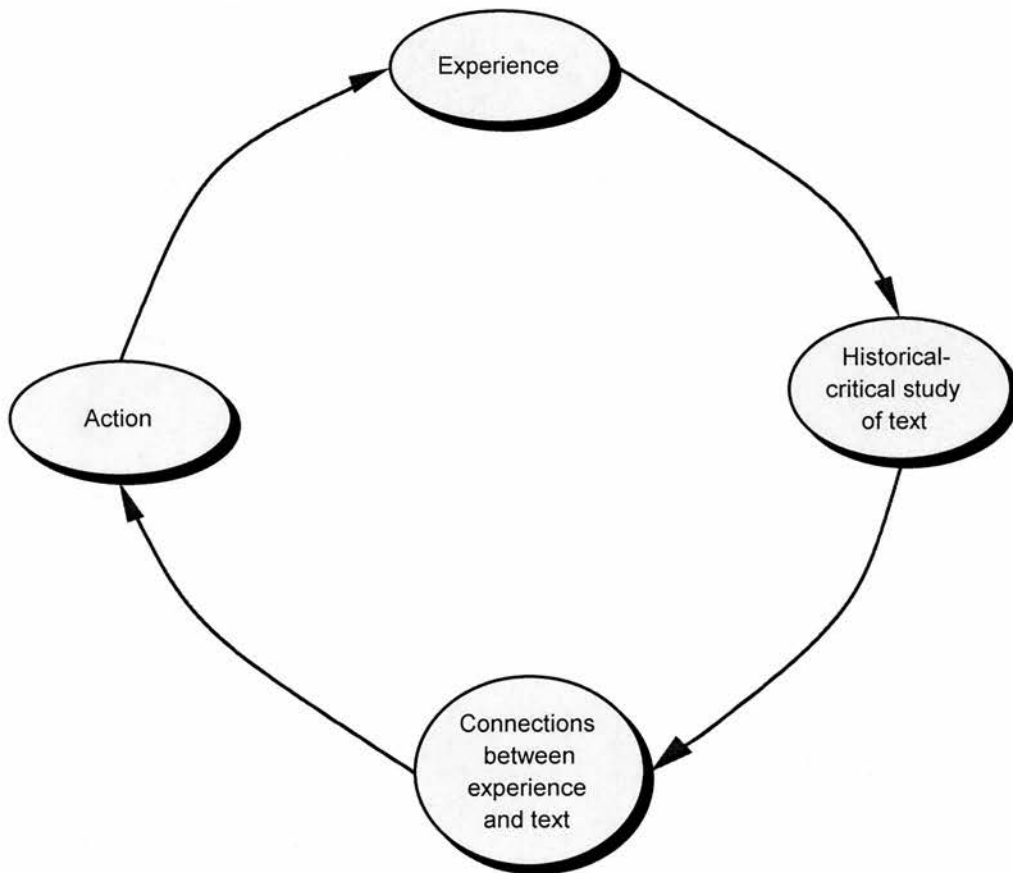
- The fourth move is to discuss what *action* may be taken in the light of this connection to transform the experiential situation with which the group began.

This action may become the experience from which the next round of the hermeneutical circle begins.

Following on from the Freirean consciousness-raising of the third stage, this final step is of liberative praxis. Here Habermas' ideology critique finds its proper conclusion: transformation.

This is the theory informing community hermeneutics (see Fig. 4). What, however, of the practice? Details of the methodological considerations shaping the form and content of my fieldwork, working with Bible study groups in nine contexts using community hermeneutics as my model, are to be found in Chapter 4. More details of the practicalities of groupwork using community hermeneutics can be found in Appendix II.

**FIG. 4: THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE
OF COMMUNITY HERMENEUTICS**



4. Theory into practice: methodology justified and fieldwork described

This chapter describes the methodology of grounded theory on which my fieldwork has been based, justifying it on theological and hermeneutical grounds. From locating a field of study, addressing ethical issues, deciding the sampling, finding a role and managing entry into the context; through finding informants, developing and maintaining relations in the field and collecting data collection in situ and outside the field, to leaving the field, it also plots the course of my fieldwork. The final section, data analysis, lays out in more detail how my grounded theory has been constructed.

Why use grounded theory?

As briefly delineated in Chapter 1, my analysis of the data collected during the fieldwork for this thesis has used grounded theory, a methodology originally developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is a sociological tool. For over twenty years the division of practical theology called congregational studies, developed from such seminal works as James F. Hopewell's *Congregation* (Hopewell 1988), has made use of sociological methods;

a recent overview is given in the 1998 publication *Studying Congregations:*

A New Handbook. As the authors of *Studying Congregations* argue, following

Don Browning:

If we believe that God is active in the world, not just an afterthought brought in to explain what goes on in the world, then describing what is happening in the world is theological work (Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley and McKinney 1998, 16).

Yet though in Britain ethnographic methods of congregational studies are evident in, for example, Al Dowie's study of culture in a Scottish congregation (Dowie 2002),

the use of grounded theory is still largely confined to the secular fields of education, nursing and management, rather than being used by practical theology. Yet the few British church-related projects using this methodology which I have found – such as Richard Cheetham's work on a grounded theory of collective worship in schools (Cheetham 2001, 165-76), or Nicola Slee's examination of women's faith development within the Christian tradition (Slee 1999) – are, like mine, educational projects. Grounded-theory studies investigating adult learning within a women's religious order (Gideon 1985), participatory parish adult education (Putrow 1986) and the role played by the Bible in different congregations' spiritualities (Dreitcer 1993) explore similar areas in the North American context, where grounded theory is much more widely used. What makes it a particularly suitable choice for my cross-disciplinary project?

Theological justification for its use may be based on the Christian claim that God is present before we begin to look, both in the created world (practical theology) and in particular modes of revelation (New Testament studies). The development of grounded theory does not begin deductively by seeking evidence from which to prove a theory already in the researcher's mind. Instead, those who use it begin inductively with the particularities of a situation, building up a theory of what is happening 'on the ground' from close attention to individual instances of the phenomenon under study; looking both for similarities across different contexts and for variation within a single context. Of course, the development of this process will also involve deductive thinking.

My apparently simple focus of interest in practical-theological terms – the methods used by people studying the Bible together in local-church groups – generated a mass of groupwork and interview data, reflecting the complexity of human nature. Here the particular ability of grounded theory among sociological methods to build an interpretative theory out of disparate materials, instead of imposing a preordained, normative shape upon it and thus losing the richness and 'thickness' of human reality, came into its own. Using grounded theory to study hermeneutical techniques used on New Testament texts may initially seem a less obvious move. However, the irreducibility of the New Testament texts to any one philosophical or theological system has been a trial to biblical interpreters since – and, indeed, before – four Gospels rather than one official account of Jesus' life gained canonical status. Efforts to 'tidy up' the story on which Christianity is based, from Marcion's attempt to sever it from its Jewish roots or Tatian's Diatesseron synthesis of all four Gospels onwards, have had little long-term success. More recent study – for example, Dunn's *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Dunn 1977) – has stressed the diversity of historical church communities which may be discerned 'behind the texts'.

Moreover, the history of biblical studies shows that in every reformulation of the New Testament data which aims at total logical coherence, some valuable emphasis is lost, if only to be rediscovered by the next wave of thought. One need only consider in this regard the variety of portraits of Jesus, all drawn from study of the New Testament, to which Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1954) bears witness. For a project where the interpretation of such texts is itself the raw material of study, it is advisable for the inherent individuality of the source texts, as well as

inevitable variation in the processes of human interpretation, to be taken into account. Grounded theory, as an interpretative rather than a normative method, is thus an eminently suitable tool to delineate the hermeneutical processes concerned.

The results of such analysis are inevitably plural, as *Research Methods in Education* describes:

From an interpretative perspective the hope of a universal theory which characterises the normative outlook gives way to multifaceted images of human behaviour as varied as the situations and contexts supporting them (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 23).

This is congruent with the diverse yet unifying work of God's Spirit, from the Pentecostal inspiration allowing the Gospel to be heard in many languages (Acts 2) to Paul's description of the varieties of gifts inspired by God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 12) and the diversity of contemporary enculturations of the Gospel.

This does not, however, imply that no coherent conclusions may be drawn from grounded theory. On the contrary, 'The theoretical formulation that results not only can be used to explain... reality but provides a framework for action' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 22). The 'framework for action' offered by grounded theory is again well matched with the goals of church-based studies. It is no accident that the fields in which grounded theory has been more widely applied – education, nursing, management – are areas where the goal of understanding is improvement of the process under study as well as abstract knowledge in its own right. Further, these are all areas in which the input of those traditionally in a less powerful position – pupils, patients, subordinates – is both crucial to obtaining such improvement and potentially difficult to obtain. The powerless – when they are allowed to speak at all – are apt to tell the powerful what they think is expected of them rather than what is

actually the case; this can also be true in church circles. Grounded theory gives a way of recording the informants' views of reality 'in the spontaneous and meaningful ways that they were actually expressed' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 21) and thus takes seriously the status of group members as capable interpreters.

Like any other researcher using grounded theory, I have inevitably come to the work with my own agenda, and in highlighting the location and control of expertise within group Bible study I stand in the tradition of critical social research. Informed by a commitment to feminist theology, my own understanding of the Gospel is in terms of the liberation and transformation of a world in which, by virtue of the coming of Christ, the coming of God's realm in the eschaton is inaugurated. From my Congregationalist heritage I also tend to emphasise participative and non-hierarchical approaches to ecclesial life. By use of open questioning and minimal personal input, however, it has been my intention not to influence unduly the groups with whom I have worked by my own expectations of Bible study and its goals; their responses (see Chapters 5-8) show that this has arguably been achieved.

How my theory was constructed

I shall use a schema from *Research Methods in Education* (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 140ff), discussing the planning of qualitative research, to describe in more detail the stages of fieldwork which resulted in the construction of my grounded theory.

Locating a field of study

The theoretical side of this question is largely covered in Chapter 1. Practically speaking, since my initial question arose within the context of the United Reformed Church (URC) – the denomination with which I am training for ordained ministry – my initial field of study was local congregations of the URC in Scotland from both Congregational and Presbyterian backgrounds. This subsequently broadened to Church of Scotland congregations. Some ecumenical groups included members from other church families, notably from Episcopal (Anglican) churches, but in the main my field of study focussed on the Reformed tradition.

Ethical issues

From the beginning of the study groups, I made it clear that at the conclusion of the groups I would be seeking individual interviews with participants. Issues evoked by questions of biblical interpretation do not immediately appear to be sensitive, yet given the hope that my research would enable participants to reflect on questions pertinent to their lives, there was a possibility of taboo subjects, for example financial or sexual, being raised. I therefore kept questions of risk and vulnerability in mind (LeCompte and Preissle 1993, 106). In accordance with good practice, I asked and obtained prior consent from all group members and interviewees for the audiotaping of sessions and interviews. One person declined to take part in the research because groups were recorded; one other (who participated in one meeting only) expressed some reservations but after consideration gave their consent. I gave each participant the assurance that, should any verbatim transcripts be used in the writing-up process, I would first return to their source, check their accuracy and

obtain permission for such use, and kept to my promise. I transcribed the audiotapes myself, and coded them to anonymise the participants and groups concerned; a breakdown of group demographics may be found in Appendix III. All groups except one (Group 5) accepted confidentiality during sessions as a requisite part of group process.

It is also part of grounded theory that participants should be kept informed of the researcher's findings in order to test their validity 'on the ground':

Because [theory] represents [everyday] reality, it should also be comprehensible and make sense both to the persons who were studied and to those practising in that area (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 23)

For this reason, after the main process of analysis had taken place, all group participants and interviewees were given the opportunity of seeing a diagrammatic schema of my findings (see Figs 6-8, to be found at the beginning of Chapters 5-7). This allowed them both to comment on their overall validity and to ascertain to what extent the pattern discerned as emerging from each individual's set of data (and revealed only to that individual) was confirmed by their own perception. Only one person expressed dissatisfaction with the classification assigned – and this dissatisfaction, when explored, added depth to the theory (see below Chapter 8).

At all times I presented myself as an overt seeker of understanding. The term 'student', which I used for myself, was more comprehensible to most participants than 'researcher' and also gave some power to the interviewee, since I was in a position of wanting to learn what they could teach me, if they chose.

Deciding the sampling

The groups I worked with were chosen on the basis of theoretical sampling – 'sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 176). Theoretical sampling is cumulative. This is because concepts and their relationships accumulate through the interplay of data collection and analysis. Moreover, sampling also increases in depth of focus. In the initial sampling, a researcher is interested in generating as many categories as possible, hence he or she gathers data on a wide range of pertinent areas. Later, the concentration is on development, density, and saturation of categories. Here the data gathering is more focussed on specific areas (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 178).

The first two pilot studies, within local URC churches (groups 1 and 8 in Appendix III), were taken as mirroring the church context in which the question had originally arisen. Data gathering of this sort corresponds with the 'open sampling' of grounded theory, (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 181). Two ecumenical groups, 4 and 5 (both containing Church of Scotland/Episcopal/URC members) offered the opportunity of denominational variation. Two further groups within the Church of Scotland (2 and 3) did the same in terms of social class and gender. When theological outlook and length of group formation began to suggest themselves as significant factors, two Church of Scotland groups of differing theological orientations (6 and 7), each of which had been in existence for more than two decades, were observed. In grounded theory terms, this is discriminate sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 187). Finally, a group of URC ordinands (group 9) provided a peer-group view of the process, though no interviews resulted. In case the identity of the group leader significantly affected results – highlighting the

significance of group power relationships – a long-distance group was run by another leader in a URC church. Though again no interview data resulted, this allowed for investigator triangulation (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 113-115).

Finding a role and managing entry into the context

Small-group Bible study requires some sort of facilitation, a role ranging in terms of function from expert lecturer to timekeeper, so my presence within the groups as someone sharing a new form of Bible study gave me an unquestioned position within the context once groups were set up. This position was necessarily more participant than observer, but both replaying group tapes and subsequent discussion of the groups with interviewees enabled retrospective observation, enhanced by different points of view.

For my pilot groups I already had some advantage in entry by virtue of knowing members of both congregation and leadership and being known as a doctoral student with some degree of expertise in biblical study. One set of ecumenical Lent groups, drawing its membership from one of the pilot congregations and two others with whom it was forging closer ecumenical links, followed naturally on from the pilot group, though ministers from the other two churches were additional gatekeepers when permission was being negotiated. The other opportunity of leading a Lent study, part of an initiative run every year by a larger group of churches within the city centre, came as a result of networking contacts. Here I was dealing with a coordinator in charge of group membership, study location and times, who mediated between myself and the committee with overall planning responsibility.

Further networking contacts, through both college and denomination, introduced me to the ministers of the churches where the next two groups were run, with whom I negotiated entry; they also arranged for publicity so that study groups could be gathered. In the two long-term groups (both located in one congregation), it was the group, an entity in itself, with whom I had to negotiate entry, though in each instance their minister acted as initial gatekeeper. The ordinands' group with which my fieldwork ended was literally my peer group, with whom I shall be completing my own ministerial training in the coming academic year, who requested input from my research.

Finding informants

From the beginning, finding people willing to take part in Bible study groups, even over a relatively short period of time, was not easy. This was partly because potential group members knew little or nothing about me and my study method, but also because small-group work seems to be declining in popularity in many churches. My eventual informants were therefore a self-selecting set of people interested in group Bible study (for demographic breakdown, see Appendix III, Tables A and B). After the first two pilot studies, members of the groups studied were not formally qualified in theology. Some of these groups were composed of professionals in various spheres of work; the members of others had less formal education. Group members at both ends of this spectrum found it hard to believe their opinions or experience could be worthy of theological study. However, only three participants subsequently declined to be interviewed, and they presented only logistical reasons for this decision.

Developing and maintaining relations in the field

My fieldwork had two phases: group study and individual interview. With six of the nine groups studied, groupwork preceded interview, so that the latter could shed light on the former. Members of the two long-term groups were interviewed before the study series instead, to determine whether their responses would differ significantly, since those who had already experienced the group sessions might be influenced by that context or by knowledge of my own beliefs and interests. This strategy is technically known as 'reliability as equivalence' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 118); its only drawback was that less material about the process of community hermeneutics could be collected from these groups since at the time of interview this had not yet taken place.

In each case the first group meeting was crucial for the success of the whole project, since if people did not find confidence through my leadership or significance in the process they could choose not to attend subsequent groups; this did indeed happen with three individuals in different groups. Working with long-term groups which had developed their own dynamic and coherence decreased this likelihood. Skills of group management and conflict resolution, combined with reticence regarding my own theological opinions, were necessary for developing and maintaining good relations in the field, as was the conscious avoidance of theological jargon.

Apart from the two long-term groups, research interviews were carried out after the series of Bible study sessions which constituted the first research phase. This meant that the interviewee and I had already built up a relationship over six to twelve hours' contact time during groupwork. This enabled an initial rapport, which assisted

interviewees in discussing the potentially sensitive topic of religious understanding. Open-ended questions of a narrative rather than a factual nature were deliberately chosen to enhance interviewees' confidence as experts on their own lives and thus work against the inevitable power discrepancy between interviewer and interviewee.

Data collection in situ

Qualitative interviewing is a technique highly compatible with grounded theory because it aims at describing the life world of the interviewee. According to Kvale (1996, 30) it seeks meaning rather than quantified knowledge and looks for nuanced description of aspects of the subjects' life-worlds within 'specific situations and action sequences... not general opinions'. In consonance with the perspective of grounded theory, the interviewer looks for 'new and unexpected phenomena' rather than imposing external interpretative themes. Ambiguity and the possibility of change are also characteristic of such interviews, which rely on the sensitivity of the interviewer and on the relations between the two. Apparently, the results can be life-enhancing for the interviewee. In my experience, they certainly proved so for the interviewer.

These particular interviews were of the semi-structured variety commonly employed in qualitative work

where a schedule is prepared but it is sufficiently open-ended to enable the contents to be re-ordered, digressions and expansions made, new avenues to be included, and further probing to be undertaken (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 146).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) distinguish further between topical and cultural interviews.

They define topical interviews as

seek[ing] out explanations of events and descriptions of processes. The researcher is generally looking for detailed factual information. In topical interviews, the interviewer typically plays a more active role in directing the questioning and in keeping the conversation on a specific topic (Rubin and Rubin 1995, 29).

The questions I asked were indeed focussed on each respondent's experience of Bible study, both in the past and in my groups, and hence somewhat more structured and directive than would be the case in cultural interviewing, which has more of an ethnographic flavour. After the two pilot groups, four major questions were asked of all interviewees:

- When you come to a Bible study group, what do you hope to gain from it?
- Describe an example from your past experience of good Bible study and one of bad Bible study, explaining your choices.
- If you were describing the method of group Bible study we used to someone outside the group, what aspect of the group would come to mind?

Follow-up 'prompts and probes' (Morrison 1993, 66) enlarged upon the interviewees' responses. However, since my overall aim was for 'the story [to be] told by the experts, the members of the culture, in their own words' (Rubin and Rubin 1995, 30), these interviews also had cultural aspects. Where possible, in accordance with grounded theory, the dimensions of a thematic topic (for example youth-age; personal experience-academic knowledge; group study-individual study) were explored. Feedback on group leadership, group dynamics and the perceived success of the various sections of groupwork was also elicited and given. In addition, the special knowledge of each interviewee – in adult education, as an experienced minister, in working with children or in other areas – was used as a resource to appraise the potential scope of community hermeneutics.

In theory the distinction between topical and cultural interviews is clear-cut.

However, as Rubin and Rubin admit,

In practice, cultural and topical styles are often mixed in a single interview... In such situations, the researcher may alternate between listening for nuanced cultural meanings and asking about events (Rubin and Rubin 1995, 31).

This was my experience. The open-ended nature of the questions asked was also important, as *Research Methods in Education* explains:

Open-ended questions have a number of advantages: they are flexible, they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge; they encourage co-operation and help establish rapport; and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes. Open-ended situations can also result in unexpected or unanticipated answers which may suggest hitherto unthought-of relationships or hypotheses (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 275).

Audio-tapes of the groups themselves and fieldnotes constitute the rest of my data collected in situ.

Data collection outside the field

In this category I would place interviews with the ministers of the churches where I ran study series; a minister from India and one from Zambia; a church member who found the group aspect of Bible study unhelpful and a Scottish minister involved in contextual Bible study. Interviews with the churches' ministers provided additional background on the study experience of my primary informants. Interviews with non-British informants aimed to sensitise myself to aspects of Bible study which, as an insider to the British church context, I might not have noticed. They and the informant who found groups unhelpful were also sought as possibly negative and/or discrepant cases (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 150). The minister involved in contextual Bible study (see below Chapter 10) had longer-term experience of leading groups similar to mine, and thus provided parallels and contrasts with my own experience.

Leaving the field

Though in more ethnographic fieldwork leaving the field may present difficulties, apart from the necessary follow-up involved in eliciting feedback reactions, my interaction with most group members ended cleanly after interview or – in the case of one long-term group where interviews were conducted first – with the last group meeting. I became a regular member of the other long-term study group, thus to some extent turning into a group insider. However, my research did not form a subsequent topic of conversation, maybe because it was in this group that the cycle of community hermeneutics had been broken (for a more detailed description of this, see Chapter 7; for analysis of possible reasons behind it see Chapter 8). Nor did I gain further insights into group process as a result of my continuing attendance.

Data analysis

During the initial period of analysis I became aware of my own emic/etic status in Bible study groups using historical-critical methods, as my fieldnotes describe:

When I started to participate in Bible studies it was as someone who'd studied the Bible historical-critically... so I already knew the problem of mediating academic knowledge in a devotional context. So in this situation I am partially an outsider to members of groups, though partially an insider through knowing about participation in group dynamics from within.

Developing theoretical sensitivity through open coding

The process of piloting two groups, as well as increasing my competence in leadership and interview skills, and improving the group process as a result of interview feedback, also enabled me to increase my degree of theoretical sensitivity to themes likely to arise in the field. Theoretical sensitivity is a key element of grounded theory, designed to

challenge [one's] assumptions, delve beneath [one's] experience, and look beyond the literature... to uncover phenomena and arrive at new theoretical formulations (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 76)

To enhance this process of sensitisation I created an initial framework of open coding with the QSR NUD*IST 4 (N4) qualitative data analysis computer program, using the first five interviews transcribed. Strauss and Corbin (1998, 61) define open coding as 'the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data'. They consider that the analytical process itself 'provides an additional resource for theoretical sensitivity. Insight and understanding about a phenomenon increase as you interact with your data' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 43). This initial process of analysis made me begin to reflect on two broad categorisations of data, organised under the headings of groupwork and study method. As my fieldwork notes of the time report:

[T]he major thematic split to come out of interview analysis thus far is between study in itself and the group of people engaged in studying... Am I more interested in the perceptions of individuals who've been through the method, or in the perceptions of a group who have done it together?

At the time I wondered whether to concentrate on one of these to the exclusion of the other:

Given that in only five interviews analysed so far, over 90 NUD*IST codes have already been identified, I shall need to decide which branch to follow up in order to focus on my specific interests. My immediate intuition is to follow up on study itself. The aims and methods of Bible study as such are an area of evident theological concern; moreover, the dynamics of small groups in general have already been studied.

However, given Strauss' and Corbin's warning against premature closure of interpretation during the open coding stage:

[N]ever impose anything on the data. This means that initially any concepts, categories, or hypotheses that come out of the use of [theoretical sensitisation] are to be considered provisional (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 94)

it seemed better practice to retain both.

Reflection on the process so far, documented in my fieldnotes, highlighted some hypotheses to be tested by further data collection. This demonstrates the role that deductive as well as inductive thinking plays in grounded theory, as Strauss and Corbin explain:

[W]hile coding we are constantly moving between inductive and deductive thinking. That is, we deductively propose statements of relationships or suggest possible properties and their dimensions when working with data, then actually attempt to verify what we have deduced against data as we compare incident with incident. There is a constant interplay between proposing and checking. This back and forth movement is what makes our theory grounded! (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 111)

Factors which might affect the success of Bible study groups, and which were subsequently tested out by theoretical sampling (see above) included:

- Denominational/congregational variety
- The degree to which participants already knew each other
- The group's degree of ability to determine and therefore 'own' its theme of study.
- The duration and degree of continuity of the group as a corporate entity
- Theological position and variety
- Leadership style

It should be noted that at this stage the use of the term 'success' of a Bible study group was more intuitive than defined.

Another consequence of this initial analysis was the highlighting, noted in my fieldnotes of the time, of certain lacunae in the data so far. One of these was the absence of 'history' as an interpretative category in my respondents' replies:

One notable thematic absence from interviews thus far is that of the historical dimension to the Gospels. It is notable because my current theoretical background [see Chapters 2 and 3] lays a heavy stress on the significant part played by the transmission of Christian tradition through history (from oral transmission through

the writing of the Gospels to the present day) in the believing community's relationship with the foundational stories of the faith. My next series of interviews will establish whether this absence can be explained by questions not specifically having been asked about this dimension of Bible study, or whether it is a less significant factor in biblical interpretation 'on the ground' than might be held theoretically.

The question I added to the interview schedule to explore this possibility was:

- When you are reading the Gospels, do you think of them more as history, or as story?

Another interesting gap in the data was the near total absence of experiential consequences arising directly from Bible study. As my fieldnotes commented:

Another aspect of biblical interpretation, which has not as yet raised much enthusiasm among interviewees, though it is a personal interest of mine, is the possibility of action arising directly from group study of the Bible.

From this a further set of questions around the topic of revelation was formulated, to test the hypothesis that one's reaction to Bible study depended on where in the process one discerned the presence of God. These were couched in ordinary rather than theological terms, to minimise the possibility of the interviewee giving 'theologically correct' replies:

- If you were in a group studying another book rather than the Bible, would it be the same? If it was different, how?
- When you're not doing Bible study and not in church, in your everyday life, do you ask yourself about particular life events, Where is God in this?
- What about in world events?

Coding relating to the answers given to these questions, as well more information on the others already cited, continued to be built into the N4 coding system, which ended up, in its seventh and final form, with nearly a thousand categories. Inspiration Software® was used to display and print out these categories.

Making new connections with axial coding

The next stage of analysis in the grounded theory model is axial coding, defined by Strauss and Corbin as

a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories. This is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, contexts, action/interactional strategies and consequences (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 96).

This was necessarily done using Inspiration® software, since the display of linked categories offered by N4 programming could not handle the high degree of interconnection between concepts required.

The first step in the paradigm of axial coding is to identify the *phenomenon* under study: 'the central idea, event, happening, about which a set of actions/interactions is directed at managing or handling, or to which the set is related' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 100). Since the vast majority of participants in local-church Bible study groups were committed to the connection of their life and the text in a personally meaningful way, 'successful' group Bible study, the phenomenon under study, was taken to be the process through which this connection was achieved for group members.

Secondly, referring to the *causal conditions* leading to that phenomenon ('the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon', Strauss and Corbin 1990, 100), Strauss and Corbin note that '[t]he consequences of one set of actions may become part of the conditions... affecting the next set of action/interactions occurring in a sequence'. Given that the study process under observation in this particular case is based on the hermeneutical circle, causal conditions and desired consequences became particularly hard to distinguish, a difficulty compounded by the voluntary and interior nature of the choice of study

strategy involved. However, three varieties of study motivation/appropriation were discerned, briefly formulated thus: to learn more, to become a better person; to change the world. These gave rise to the eventual labelling of the three modes of interpretation discerned: Thinker, Relater, Changer.

Thirdly, the *context* of connection ('the particular set of conditions within which the action/interaction strategies are taken to manage, handle, carry out, and respond to a specific phenomenon', Strauss and Corbin 1990, 100) covered both my original descriptive categories of data, study and groupwork. This context, then, comprised factors which made for good or bad Bible study and groupwork.

Fourthly, *intervening conditions* must be discerned. These are 'the broader structural context pertaining to a phenomenon' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 103). For biblical interpretation, these would come under the overall heading of the participant's worldview. Subcategories affecting worldview could include theological stance (where one discerned the presence of God); self-understanding (as someone who thinks, someone who relates, someone who acts); demographic factors (for example gender, education, generation). Whether and how one's worldview had altered over the course of time might also be relevant.

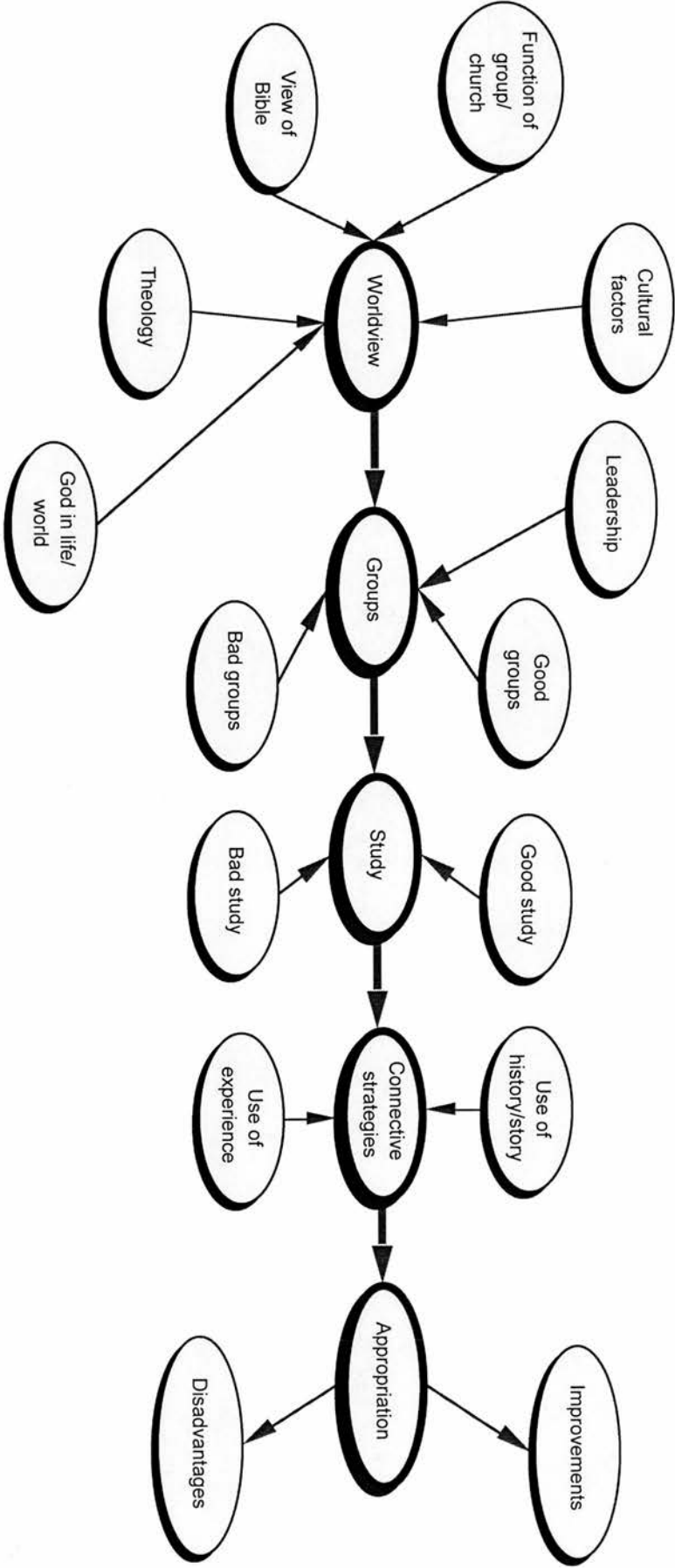
Fifthly, *strategies for action/interaction* in this context are the hermeneutical tools used by group participants to connect life and text. Given the emphasis in this particular project on the usefulness of historical-critical methods in biblical interpretation, two strategies were isolated here: the use of history and/or story and that of personal experience.

Sixthly, *consequences* of using these tools include the appropriation by participants of the biblical texts in their lives in some way meaningful to them (see discussion of causal conditions above), as well as the advantages and disadvantages inherent in each form of appropriation.

This axial coding framework (see Fig.5) describes my grounded theory of the phenomenon of biblical interpretation in local-church group study. For each participant the aim of Bible study, determined by worldview and expressed through preferences in study, groupwork and use of the hermeneutical tools of history/story and experience to interact with the texts, results in a characteristic mode of textual appropriation. Three discrete approaches to lay biblical interpretation were found, corresponding to three modes of appropriation: Thinking, Relating and Changing (see Figs 6, 7 and 8 at the beginning of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 respectively).

Recoding of the N4 data was required to reflect this: each text unit within an interview (divided into lines, typically a sentence long) was coded in one or more of these three modes. The number of units from each mode assigned to each of my study-group participants having been summed, interviewees' overall and subsidiary preferences could be assigned (see Tables C and D in Appendix III). Such a crude analysis has no statistical validity; it would be quite possible for interviewees to speak at greater length about a study mode which is not theirs than about that which they espouse. Moreover, few people kept to the same mode through every aspect of the study process. However, in feedback only one person queried their overall classification (see Chapter 8), demonstrating the complex development of hermeneutical ability within lay Bible study which this investigation can only sketch.

FIG. 5: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN LOCAL-CHURCH GROUP STUDY



Constructing the process

The final analytical task was to integrate these three ways of using the axial-coding paradigm into one overall sequence. This was done by taking two further factors into account: time, which allowed for development from one form of appropriation to another; and community formation, which allowed individual participants to affect each other's text-appropriative habits. Both of these came under the grounded theory heading of 'process': 'the linking of action/interactional sequences... to give the reader a sense of the flow of events that occur with the passage of time' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 143, 147).

This integration involved *explicating the story line*: 'the conceptualization of a descriptive story about the central phenomenon of the study' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 119). The story of my thesis turned out to be how a group of individual Christians, studying the Bible within a local-church context, can develop into an interpretative community; the three approaches to biblical study discerned function as aspects of this story.

The next three chapters cover these three appropriative modes of Bible study in more detail, with one chapter each devoted to Thinking, Relating and Changing modes of study. In each case, the chapter opens with an ethnological account of how a typical group in this mode might operate. Descriptions of the associated worldview and preferences in terms of study, groupwork and leadership styles follow, along with the interactions of people using this mode with the study model of community hermeneutics, analysed according to each step of the cycle. This general description of the hermeneutics of lay participants in local-church Bible study groups lays the

groundwork for a later focus (Chapter 9) on the characteristic hermeneutical uses made of history/story and personal experience by participants with different appropriative modes, when presented with historical-critical methods of Bible study.

A note must be made on my assignment to various participants and groups described within this thesis of the theological labels conservative, liberal or radical. This, of course, is a matter of positions along a continuous spectrum rather than of fixed points: when I label some Relaters 'conservative' and others 'liberal', for example, this must necessarily be in relation to each other, rather than to any external standard.

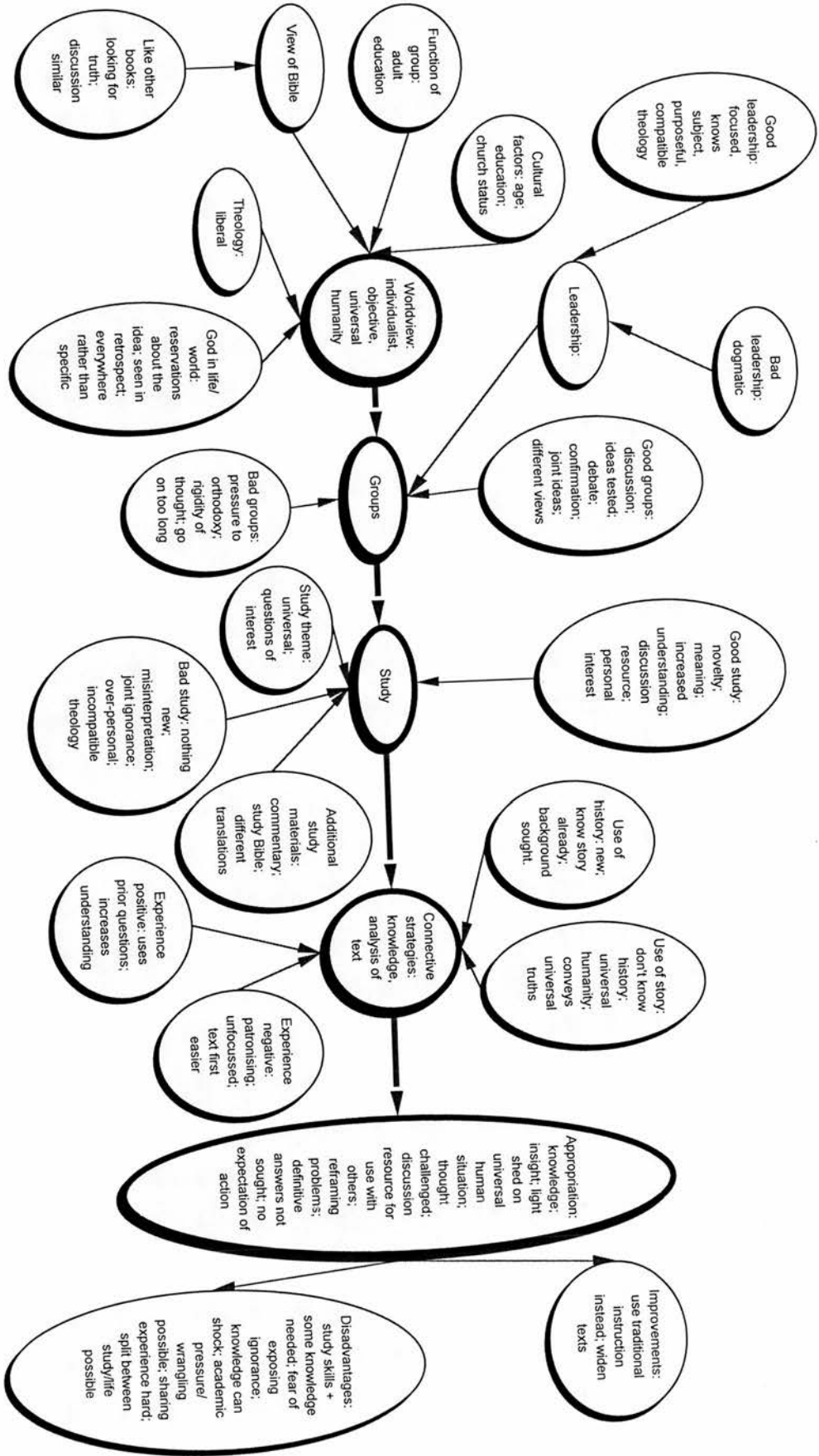


FIG. 6: THINKER

5. The Thinker: Bible study for ideas

S: *If you had the choice, say, between studying a biblical text on an academic basis, and finding out more about it... on the one hand, and having some kind of faith journey, transformative experience on [the] other, which would you choose?*

HG: *For me, here, right now? I think the former...*

S: *Aha. And why would that be?*

HG: *If you gave me a library, a PC, you know, Internet connection, a Bible, and said, There's a passage, I would probably spend a pleasant afternoon doing the business... the interest is in the study of that kind.*

Group formation

Picture an imaginary, yet typical scene. It is a weekday evening, quite likely dark, quite likely wet – this is, after all, Britain. A fairly small circle of upright chairs, no more than a dozen, is set out at one end of a larger room, to be found at the end of a labyrinthine corridor leading from the church sanctuary. It's a multi-purpose room, judging by a few children's toys left scattered around; artwork from the Sunday school and notices about the next coffee morning on the walls; a pile of sheet music on a somewhat battered piano. Tea and coffee (maybe fairly traded); cups and saucers (probably matching), are set out on a tray with milk, sugar and biscuits; the kettle has boiled. Having set up the flipchart for maximum visibility, put new batteries in the tape-recorder and checked the pens still work, the group leader is pacing the room, awaiting the arrival of any interested parties. Finally people appear at the door, singly or in pairs, apologising for lateness – the last-minute phone call, the vagaries of public transport. They hover at the edge of the circle, not sure what will be demanded of them. The leader calls the group to order; everyone sits down and has a good look at who else has come. Introductions are made around the room. Then comes the first question: and the group falls silent...

Such a scenario characterises a specially convened church Bible study group.

Sometimes it has been called to mark a period in the church year – Advent or Lent – set aside in more Catholic churches for consideration of matters of the faith; via the ecumenical movement this has spread to more Protestant congregations. Sometimes it is part of a church's adult-education initiative, set in motion by minister or elders (since my study has generally been in the context of Reformed churches, I shall, except where this is evidently inappropriate, use Reformed terminology to describe aspects of church life, without any implications of normativity.) Sometimes, as in this instance, members of a congregation have agreed to co-operate in research by an external party. People who come to such a group are likely to have a nodding acquaintance with each other, but may not know much of each other's circumstances. Older members – often in the majority – may have failing sight, hearing or balance. Younger members may have had to set up complicated babysitting arrangements. Wives – or, less likely, husbands – who attend without their partner may have had to cook and wash up a quick meal before rushing out, in order to arrive on time. Why then do they come out on a cold, dark evening to sit in a draughty room on uncomfortable chairs for an hour and a half?

The immediate and universal answer is: because they want to know more about the Bible. People in local-church study groups are motivated by the hope of understanding more about the book which is – especially in the Reformed tradition – at the very heart of their faith. Some people see themselves as ignorant of the Bible, and want to change that:

DS: I think it was about time in my life that I should know more about what's in that book.

A smaller number want study to remind themselves of what they already know:

'Sometimes just a refresher course to as to what's going on' (WO). Their thirst for understanding ranges from the all-encompassing: 'I'm hoping to get more knowledge of Jesus and the Bible and things like that' (SW) to a more nuanced desire, more typical of those with some academic study behind them:

TT: I hope that... I will learn a little bit more about the Scriptures, about their background, their context, their meaning – both in the contemporary sense in which they were written, and the context in which they emerged – and also how they might address, help me as an individual.

As this second quotation shows, the motivation of people in local-church Bible study groups differs from academic interest in one crucial respect: they want the text to have some personal relevance. As we shall see, understanding of the nature of that relevance varies. But it is the desire for connection between the biblical texts and some aspect of their lives – whether cerebral, relational or practical – which has motivated this small, valiant group to ignore the blandishments of cinema, pub or quiet evening in front of the television in favour of group Bible study.

Of course, from one perspective the statement that people participate in group Bible studies in order to improve their knowledge of the Bible is almost a truism. For any adult study group, whether under the aegis of formal education or more informally organised, greater knowledge of the subject matter is one assumed goal of study.

Given, however, the historical emphasis within Reformed churches on the importance of biblical interpretation by the laity as opposed to the institutional church, it is unexpected to find within this sector of the Christian community such a stress on ignorance of the Bible that remedial work is considered necessary.

Are not these people among the more committed, if they are prepared to set aside time for church-related groups during the week? And, since every church service includes at least one reading from the Bible, and nearly all feature a sermon, one might argue that by sheer force of repetition every church attender, let alone every study group member, should be a biblical expert. Yet it is no false modesty that drives such congregational confessions, as some of the ministers I interviewed ruefully admitted:

TC: [A] lot of people you assume know the Bible don't. It's quite alarming how little people do know... Because they operate a filter, I think, or they're immunised against listening.

TT: [E]ven with the present generation of people who are the active church members and who maybe came through in their younger days, Sunday school and Bible class and... that more traditional kind of route – where they had developed their knowledge... in terms of biology or history or geography or the other kind of disciplines or faculties...you know, they wouldn't go round bleeding people any more, they'd actually have moved on in medical treatment a wee bit – the level of biblical knowledge and understanding I have on occasion found surprisingly low.

Group members themselves confirm this perception. One participant [EP] commented wryly that 'most of us here [in her church] are still at a teenage level of understanding'. Her diagnosis has two implications for Bible study groups. Firstly, the biblical knowledge of churchgoers has not progressed towards maturity at a rate commensurate with the rest of their understanding. Secondly, and this applies particularly to older participants, their expected learning style derives from the 'banking' mode of education (see Chapter 3) current when they were teenagers at school, where the expert teacher passed her knowledge on to the ignorant class. Sermons in which the expert minister lectures the ignorant congregation are an extension of this teaching method.

Though at lower levels of the educational system more dialogical models of learning have come into the classroom, transmission of knowledge from teacher to student is still the method by which much further education, including theological education, proceeds. This leads to an interesting situation whereby both those with most exposure to formal education and those with least recent experience of it may assume the relevance of this model to group Bible study. Initially, the leader is there to teach, the members to learn. When successful learning has taken place, teacher and learners can find themselves on a more equal level, and ideas can become the currency of dialogue between them.

Every study group properly contains elements of this dynamic: listening to those who know more – and can communicate that knowledge competently – leads to greater insight in those who know less. For a specially convened group, whose members may not know each other well, it is a way for communication to begin in neutral territory, focussing on textual interpretation rather than the text's interpreters, establishing a hierarchy of learning from expert to tyro. Those with less experience of formal education may assume it to be the only way to learn. Moreover, for a group practising methods of historical criticism, the dissemination of new ideas and the demonstration of techniques by those with more experience in them can be a useful mode of study. But for some members of group Bible studies, the Thinkers, gaining new insights from the experts is always the point of study:

WT: I hope to learn... from people who... are knowledgeable. Who have the training, perhaps. Who have more insight because they've done more study. I hope to learn from... the expert.

Outside the context of a study group, Thinkers may be deeply involved in both formation of relationships and social action. However, for a Thinker, a good Bible

study is one in which one encounters the expert, hears what they have to say about the texts under study, and comes away with new ideas and fresh insight. Thinkers ask no more of the group.

Worldview

Thinkers may be divided into three groupings: some may be born that way, some acquire its characteristics voluntarily, and some have the paradigm thrust upon them. Born Thinkers, irrespective of background or training, are naturally attracted to the exchange of ideas. Others who acquire Thinking characteristics may be practitioners of the discipline of academic theology themselves, or have trained as professionals in some other field. They are ready to call upon academics as the experts in theology too. Yet others may have had this mode of education thrust upon them in youth: these are often older rather than younger, working rather than middle class, beginners rather than experienced in Bible study. Their past learning experience has been restricted to the banking paradigm, and they see themselves as recipients rather than initiators of any academic discourse, theology included.

Thinkers understand the purpose of the Bible study group as offering adult education which takes churchgoers seriously as capable adults:

NG: I think it must be more than obvious that in a city like Scotchester there are many, many educated people who take a... really live interest in theology... any new method which is going to be enlightening is going to be very welcome.

The Bible, in a Thinker's eyes, can be studied using the same techniques as any other book:

S: [W]hen you're discussing the Bible in a discussion group, is that different from if you were having some other topic, say if you were discussing a great novel?

OA: No, no. I've not done any studying into novels, but I don't think so, no. Perhaps that's wrong, it's not meant to be blasphemous... But I meant the system. I'm talking about the meaning, the system... No.

This demonstrates Thinkers' deliberate intention, expressed here by a Thinking minister, to use an objective approach when dealing with the biblical text:

GT: I allow the text to speak for itself. What I mean by that is I do not bring to it any Christian doctrines as such... I allow biblical scholars to tell me what the passage is saying... I allow the passage to speak and that seems to me to be the best thing, the most legitimate use of the Bible.

This avowedly detached viewpoint is consonant with a general positioning of the Thinkers in my fieldwork nearer the liberal end of the theological spectrum, though the existence of conservative as well as liberal academics (see also my discussion of Kelsey's work in Chapter 10) suggests the likelihood of finding conservative Thinkers in local Bible study groups too. The reservations of my Thinking interviewees when asked for their views on God's revelation outside the Bible are also indicative of such positioning. The question of revelation is particularly problematic for more radical Thinkers:

TH: [A]t the moment I'm not quite sure what I mean by God and whether in fact God is a kind of external person, or whether God is in some way in everything. And I find it quite difficult... to talk or think about God as having a purpose and somehow moving, manipulating events.

More generally, Thinkers are likely to struggle with the concept of literal miracle, as others around them will notice.

AR: We, SW... well, we grew up in the church together and we went to a Bible class. And he always had – probably, being an engineer, which he now is – he had a problem with the miracles... The practicalities of the miracles.

S: How could it be?

AR: How could you take this fish and, you know, make it – and I've heard explanations like, Oh, lots of people produced lots of fishes.

S: Oh yes. Everyone took out their picnic...

AR: I used to say, I don't know. I don't really care how it was done! I just believe it! [laughs] But there are a lot of people have a lot of questions.

Such difficulties may lead Thinkers to avoid using their skills on problematic areas:

WR: One of the recent studies was miracles, which didn't get us very far. But, I mean, that's a case in point that, if you take an analytical approach to miracles... you know –

S: You can get bogged down in just the philosophical questions...

WR: I don't think you get bogged down so much, I think you destroy the whole concept... But I don't think that's helpful.

Instead, some do not view God in interventionist terms at all:

NT: [M]y understanding of faith recognises that God is ever-present... I'd very infrequently, hardly at all, ask, Where is God in this? God is in it all; God is with me in my life.

S: But within that sort of all-encompassing context, do you think of God as acting one way or another in a particular set of circumstances?

NT: I don't believe in an interventionist God. God is present with me in the choices I make.

Other Thinkers may discern God's action in retrospect:

GT: I think that it can be incredibly hard to discern God active in the here and now. That's part of what faith is. Faith is a belief, you think God is in a particular direction. And you take a line in that direction... And you step out in faith. Very often it's not till afterwards that you say, Yes, this is right. And that would be true of a lot of experience. In lots of ways, much of the Bible is reflection on things that happened a long time ago. Some of the events a very long time ago. So I think that's true of individual experience as well. Sometimes it's a matter of thinking, Yes, Yes, I was in the right place, because look what happened.

Thinkers find ideas interesting in their own right, irrespective of relevance:

S: [D]oes [Bible study] necessarily have to connect with the rest of [group members'] lives?

GT: ...I suppose yes and no. There are some facts that are just interesting to know.

NC: [T]he Bible stuff that I enjoyed more was the kind of free-wheeling and thought-provoking kind of things that we've done.

For this reason they experience no pressure, when studying, to seek specific answers to questions relating to life issues. Indeed, an expectation of finding such answers directly through study is not part of their worldview:

NI: I think if we... all went home and said, Well, the Bible has come up with this answer, I would go home dissatisfied, because I know that life is more complicated than looking at the Bible, delving into it and coming out with some easy, successful answer. Its role is just to sort of broaden the way of looking at it, that was what I got most out of it.

NC: [T]he need that people seemed to express, as they were going through... wasn't the need to fight [the problem under discussion], it was the need to accept what things are like and to deal with it.

The mechanism for such reframing of a Thinker's questions is the timeless relevance of the biblical texts to universal human experience:

NI: I'm not saying I'm using the Bible as an appliance to fix specific problems, but rather that the Bible is all about stories that come up time and time again in human experience, so therefore you can't... separate the Bible from real life in the twenty-first century.

Another aspect of their more liberal orientation is Thinkers' expectation of an individual rather than a corporate response to the text:

NI: Well... I don't necessarily think that the purpose of the Bible study for me should be to come up with answers, but rather that it should just be thought-provoking and one can go home and look at it by oneself... I think it's naïve to think that in a group situation you'd come up with answers really individualised... if you've got a really serious problem, although you can be helped by a group situation, you really have to help yourself in the end.

TI: [W]hat I liked about [the study method] was that... it started from our daily life, but it ended with one's own life and, when I say one's own life it might just as well be a corporate life or a family life, but we all came to it as individuals, so what we were taking out of it I suppose was inevitably an individual thing.

This aspect of being a Thinker may partly be an effect of social class, as one of them reflected:

SF: I never thought our action would be, Let's agree as a group to sign this charter or start a recycling group in church, or whatever... I suspect that

that's probably to do with comfortable middle-classness, that Bible study is about learning, which is an individual thing, as opposed to action.

However, such a reaction may also be a matter of individual temperament. One of only two individuals in my study whose preference, according to my fieldwork analysis, was constantly for Thinking (see Appendix III) was the only interviewee not to instance any distinction in preference between group study and studying on one's own. The quotation with which this chapter begins illustrates the Thinker's ability to work and think alone, a capacity either innate or reinforced by academic study already undergone. This is not surprising, given Thinkers' study preferences.

What do Thinkers gain from study?

The major requirement of good Bible study, from Thinkers' perspective, is finding out something they did not know before.

TH: I was visiting a church in Galashiels, and it was a youth group, and we were looking at the story of Rahab the harlot... And really, it alerted me to a kind of paradox, that here was somebody who... society probably disapproved of, who somehow was considered one of the saints... And because it was... quite unique to me then – I'd have been about twenty – a unique idea, it stuck in my mind.

The historical-critical approach to biblical hermeneutics can be appealing to Thinkers for this reason: it offers new ways into understanding the Bible as well as fresh views of particular passages.

S: Why might you [as a minister] focus more on history? Under what circumstances?

TC: You would do that with people whom you perceive to know less, people who specifically want to learn, wish to understand context.

SF: [A particular study] was to do with translation and therefore... interpretation and translation, and when you saw this – I'm going to say hidden, certainly hidden to me because I don't have the biblical languages – when you had that actual textual interpretation... that actually turned the meaning of the passage, because... the wording changed.

Such moments of enlightenment are Thinkers' reward for study. Yet even difficulties in interpretation can be grist to their mill, since if an enquiry leads towards truth, it leads towards God:

GT: I don't think it's helpful to treat adults like children... sometimes a passage has a serious problem in translation, and often in English, just the fact that it's translated, I think is important ... I know the theologians say God is the God of truth. When we discover truth we discover God... So if it's through technical discussion or whatever, you've got to respect that.

For people trained in academic theology, the historical-critical approach to studying the Bible can become addictive. As NC admitted: 'I'd be very frustrated with a Bible study that didn't give you some of the interesting detail that you get from the academic approach.' However, so long as they find the subject under discussion interesting or novel Thinkers can be omnivorous in their interest:

NG I don't really mind what part of the Bible is studied, and I don't really mind who is studying it along with me.

OA: [T]hough I've been reading the Bible an awful long time now, there's still a lot I don't know. For instance, today the service at W Church was starting from the lectionary which churches often have, and we were reading Joel. I never remember reading Joel before! That's an example.

The obverse of this thirst for novelty is that Thinkers do not appreciate groups where they learn nothing:

NG: I've not liked Bible study Lent groups where... the material has been too well known, so that we don't do anything new really.

The cardinal sin, as far as Thinkers are concerned, however, involves having their powers of thought curtailed, either through being intellectually underestimated or through being told what to think.

EP: Sometimes I felt [bad Bible study] was really just a bit more indoctrination... Just telling me the things that I'd learned... before: I know this story!

WT: [I]f people talk down to you, I mean it's like using baby words to a child. It doesn't actually work very well in the long run.

ST: The group in which I started Bible study came to exert a form of emotional blackmail – some responses were not acceptable. I wouldn't go to any group where I couldn't say what I thought.

This dislike of dogmatism is often linked in liberal Thinkers with the rejection of a rigidly conservative theology:

NC: I remember going with a friend... to a post-Billy-Graham Bible study and finding that very rigid and not enjoying that at all... I think we worked through a structured set of steps, and... as soon as you... looked at the page, you could see what the lesson was we were supposed to learn. And it was a very conservative lesson as well. It was very rigid in the way we were supposed to work through it... you could have converted it to a multiple choice test and then marked people if they ticked the right box.

Having experienced group dogmatism, Thinkers tend to avoid it. Their resources are undoubtedly sufficient for individual study. But if a group of Thinkers does come together, how does it operate?

How does a group of Thinkers work?

Thinkers' preferred study tools – commentaries, study Bibles and different translations – can all be used individually as well as in groups. However, they also tend to value group study for its potential to share ideas more widely through discussion, as well as to aid close and disciplined focus on one idea:

TH: I think there's a discipline about being with a group of people, it's hard to replicate on your own... My mind tends to jump from one thing to another, unless I'm really focussed on something, and I think... you learn more in group situations.

The value of discussion can include trying out one's own ideas.

RD: Partly, of course, group Bible study... gives you a chance to put your own ideas that you have had from your own study, or even that you've just spontaneously got during the group study... into the ring.

Thinkers welcome debate, even if artificially engendered:

ST: One example of good Bible study was studying the book of Ruth: we were divided by the leader into two groups, one to argue that it was a feminist book and the other that it wasn't. Even if we didn't agree with our assigned point of view, we began to grapple with it intellectually and see it from different points of view.

Indeed, if there is too much consensus, they may be tempted to create a little dissension, just to get the discussion moving:

WT: [It] would have been even better if... rather than more consensual ideas, there had been a really good go at it... I mean, half the time I was trying to stir things up.

As another Thinker commented, debate can produce desirable consequences, whether or not you agree with a particular intervention:

NC: I think you do get a definite advantage to a group, in that you get the added perspectives, and sometimes listening to someone else can be very helpful. Or equally somebody else can be very annoying, but it at least helps you sort out, in opposition to that, what you think.

There is also the possibility that one's own opinion might change as a result of discussion:

WO: [I]f you get an... outside Bible study, you can get someone else's angle on it, which may trigger you off to think along different lines. Or to think that well, maybe you hadn't got it quite right, and there's another way of looking at it.

Even the leader has the chance to learn something new:

HG: [T]he difference between a Bible study and a seminar, maybe not a good seminar but an average seminar, or more exactly a lecture, of course, is that the leader in a lecture learns nothing, in a seminar might learn a little, but in a Bible study potentially can learn a lot.

The idea of being forced by the cut and thrust of debate into group intimacy, however, is anathema for a Thinker:

HG: [T]he potential that that kind of Bible study [when seen as shared faith journey] often has for falling into a kind of soul-baring activity is a turn-off for me... I'm very happy to talk to people about these things which lie at the very core of being; my own training and my inclination and my personal

choice, as far as baring my own soul is concerned too, is on a one-to-one basis rather than in a group.

So is the prospect of pooling ignorance:

GT: [Participants] don't come to listen to their own ignorance. They come to listen to other people's opinions who they feel will inform the group. I think people have to leave with something they feel is substantial. And I know... in the hands of the ignorant I will confirm my own prejudice, and I think it's true... people can be ignorant and I've known people take passages to mean whatever they like.

EP: [I]t's sometimes just your own ignorance recycled, because you don't know, and you don't know how to [find out].

Here the role of group leader is significant.

Leadership for Thinkers

Thinkers' requirement for intellectual freedom, combined with their stress on the necessity of expert knowledge, makes good leadership, with dual competence in subject matter and group dynamics, an important factor in study groups. Especially for those operating within the banking model of education, the good leader must have expertise in her subject, in order to be able to pass on knowledge to her group:

NI: I think it's useful having, I'll use the word expert again... to come up with some ideas about how the text, what the audience was... From a historical point of view, which I would never get from a layman's perspective on the subject.

AR: I have always thought I would like to go to a Bible study where... there was a learned person like yourself there, with knowledge, and we would bring something that maybe caused us difficulty.

Specifically in the Church of Scotland context, the minister is seen (among other things) as a teaching elder, as one minister explains:

GT: I'm always cautious of the expert! Loaded word. But I think... certainly it's the minister's [task] to help to structure it, and indeed I think the part of the minister is, in the Church of Scotland, to be the teaching elder with a theology degree and a knowledge of the Scriptures. It's paid for, that's what the church has paid for... And so they have a right...to information that they

could not have access [to]... So I would say that the role of someone in charge, who happens to be the minister, is teaching elder. Someone... who has the time to prepare properly, who has the education to prepare properly. I think it's essential.

Another minister, whose first degree was in history, concurs: special knowledge is a resource which a Bible study leader can pass on to others in the group.

TT: I wonder if because I'm used to dealing with it [history] and bring to it a certain background... That I see links and connections which are, as you said... obvious to me but not obvious to others. And clearly when I read something I have, you know, however flawed, some sense of the background politics and... I'm not sure that that immediately comes from the Gospel. I think you need to read round it and almost learn that kind of background stuff... It's kind of hard to discern from within the text itself.

A desire to find out about the historical background to the texts is confirmed by study participants:

SW: [P]art of it is the happenings at that point in history, but... as lay people... I would imagine unless you really study the Bible in depth and read other books, you don't have a full background picture of knowledge of the times... I think you need to know the background... To fully understand what's going on.

The setting of Bible study is significant: an expert giving a *tour de force* lecture-style study is more likely to be found in the context of a conference than in smaller groups.

GW: [T]he sort of Bible studies I, personally, enjoy, are where an academic gives a talk on a Bible passage, where they're passionate about it. I just think about all the conferences I've been to where some speaker at the beginning of the morning session is giving a Bible study, which is actually a lecture... Where you think, Wow! And in the context of that, I think a talk is great. Different from a lecture because it's coming from the heart as well as the intellect.

However, given the lack of an acknowledged subject expert in most local-church groups, competence in leadership skills will see a leader through, given that the texts themselves play a major role in engaging the interest of any study group of Thinkers:

NG: [T]here are aspects of Bible study which depend on the nature of what you're studying, and most leaders with a bit of nous can actually get away with

doing a reasonable study. So it's an interaction. In fact, it is actually a three-way interaction: it's the leader plus the text plus the people who are there.

However, the leader must tread a fine line. Thinkers hate dogmatic, authoritarian leadership as much as being told what to think – but they do expect the leader to play an active part in guiding the discussion, in order to give the group some structure:

GT: When I'm leading I tend to try and give people enough information so that they can have a discussion, rather than giving them the whole lecture, in a sense... to actually give them enough information so they can get started. But they are guided, to make sure that when people are having reflection on the subject things don't stray off entirely, do you know what I mean? That's the way I present it.

NG: I feel that the important thing is that there should be some sense of direction in it. I don't like... the facilitation method when you fudge around till everybody finds their own little thing.

Other Thinkers stress more dialogical models of leadership, bringing the thinking abilities of other group members into prominence:

S: So [a leader should be] giving answers, or showing what questions you might have?

NI: Not giving answers, but taking the kind of Socrates approach of encouraging the students to come up with the answers by themselves.

EW: M was a good leader. I think we had something to read each time for preparation beforehand... on each study... we'd done our homework beforehand. Yes. And that was more informal. And again she was leading us more in the way that you were, drawing things out from us, and I enjoyed that very much.

However, in the final analysis Thinkers, being task- rather than relationship-oriented, find the ideas presented within a study group more important than the style of leadership proffered:

EW: I don't think it matters. It'll be different with somebody leading from the front on a particular topic and maybe expanding it, that can be good, but the other way, of bringing everybody in, is also good. That depends on a good preparation from the leader. I don't have a preference, really.

Bad leadership in Thinking terms, on the other hand, is dogmatic:

EB: [I]f you didn't agree then it was difficult to say so.

This picture of the Thinker has largely been culled from interviewees' descriptions of past Bible study. How did group members with a preference for this interpretative mode react to the experience of Bible study using the model of community hermeneutics, the variant of the hermeneutical cycle described in Chapter 3, practised during the course of my fieldwork?

Thinkers and community hermeneutics

Thinkers' characteristic choices of study theme, followed by their reactions to the four consecutive steps of experience, historical-critical close study, connection and appropriation, and a brief appraisal of Thinking as a hermeneutical strategy, will be considered in turn.

Theme

As has already been suggested (see above), Thinkers tend to look for universal patterns. A participant in one of the most successful groups suggested, as one reason for the group's ease of interpretation,

AT: Maybe we picked topics or problems – present-day problems, that are not really present-day problems... that have always been around.

This comment came from a group which had chosen its own theme, as had been the intention for every group. In two cases, however (groups 4 and 8), an outside theme, the Five Marks of Mission, first identified by the 1988 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops, was unavoidably imposed on the group by logistical considerations. This caused some problems. The closeness of a given topic to local

experience was not so significant, from a Thinking perspective, as the interesting ideas it might generate in the group:

S: [E]very now and then there were little moments of engagement about something that was happening at the church session, and I wondered in retrospect whether if we'd identified current themes going through R church session, considering that most of you were R people, then that might have been of more direct engagement.

HG: That might have been interesting. Absolutely. Yes. Or, I don't know, resolutions from General Assembly. For example, the ecumenical principles, or some of the other debates that are in at the moment, the State Care debate.

Since Thinkers' mode of operation, relying on the experts, is frequently compatible with that of banking education, where the teacher may well determine the subject under discussion, some did not feel the loss of the group's power to choose to be crucial:

ND: I think we'd have gone round and round in circles and nobody would have agreed, and I think it was just best that you said, Right, this is the topic that we're doing.

However, for other Thinkers the imposition of a theme, with its implication of intended thought control by the leader, was problematic, and to be challenged:

WT: I mean, why use it [the Five Marks of Mission]? Where did it come from? What's its purpose? Are they the right marks? I mean, I'm sorry, but I'm a cynic. Are these the right marks of mission? Who says they are the five marks of mission?

From its origins in Freirean dialogic education, the theme of experience chosen for discussion in community hermeneutics must always be such as to engage the whole group. This in itself is, however, likely to be problematic for Thinkers.

Experience

Thinkers can be ambivalent about the use of personal experience as part of the hermeneutical process. How can it be validated as relevant to the real theme of study,

the biblical text? Indeed, can discussion focussing on experiential matters, however pastorally relevant, be seen as an aspect of Bible study at all?

NG: [I]t can happen, that the group can... change its focus halfway through an evening and instead of studying, say, a healing miracle, will focus on the particular healing problems of one member of the group, or someone known to some member of the group... That doesn't feel like Bible study, not really. It's something else.

The technique of beginning a group discussion with experience and only then going on to the text is not naturally congenial for people operating in this mode:

TI: I seem to recall wanting to get on with the Bible bit... something about me that says, you know, let's start with the meat and then build from there... And I suppose... I wasn't seeing the experience bit as the meat... Although it would be valid to think of it as that, I suppose.

Thinkers' downplaying of experience as a potential *locus theologicus* is understandable. Their worldview, after all, is one where looking for the revelation of God in everyday life is at best problematic, at worst a category error. Moreover, they see study as properly focussed on the neutral ground of the texts rather than the more private arena of personal life. A request for the sharing of experience, even in confidence, brings up

WT: the difficulty of owning up to a personal experience anyway, if it's a truly meaningful one... so there's an owning up to unimportant things. Or relatively, not emotionally engaged things... [F]or me, I knew some of the members of the group too well... there are things that I would not say in their presence... I imagine that I know their reaction to it.

Interestingly, this interviewee ties in such reluctance with cultural factors:

WT: And to some extent, that's part of our psyche... you know, it's this British privacy, you know, we don't open up that much.

This geographical observation is sharpened by an English member of another group:

EP: [T]here's always been in P a feeling that people don't like house groups, don't like Bible study groups... And that is because they hesitate to expose

themselves personally, I think... Now, you remember I'm English in a Scottish situation. And that makes a difference, I think.

S: That is interesting. You think it might be part – generalising wildly – part of the Scottish character?

EP: I think it's more so... As you say, that's a very wide generalisation, but I think there are a lot of people who don't like... disclosing personal things. And you can't get very far in [Bible study] without [it].

The cultural nature of this phenomenon is underlined by the reaction of one of my peer-group reviewers, a Zambian minister with academic and teaching experience, who commented: 'In Zambia, I have found that experience can be a very relevant matter for thinking people.'

Given their approach, Thinkers may feel cautious about exposing their attitudes to issues of life and faith within a local-church group, which may be hostile to critical thought:

TH: And I've always thought very hard about the Bible, and my ideas have moved over the years. But some of my ideas, I've not been able to really articulate them because they seem to be perhaps unacceptable...

WR: A lot of it is, well, really, I think it is because of what I see anyway as being my limited spirituality, compared with others in the group who are probably much more spiritual than I.

Personal experience shared by others, moreover, might be too familiar and predictable, cutting across Thinkers' desire for novelty:

NG: I think the worst sort of Bible study is... where you know the people perhaps a little bit too well, so you've heard their opinion about this particular one before, many times.

The endeavour to be objective in study, as well as the middle-class individualism already touched on above as a possible factor in some Thinkers' worldviews, may also have its part to play in their evident difficulty in using personal experience as fit matter for discussion in a Bible study group. However, experience can find a place within the Thinking worldview, albeit in a subordinate position. Another Thinker,

theologically trained, saw the use of experience as a necessary precursor to 'real' study for people with no theological background:

HG: [I]t seems to me that actually if we're talking about a sort of thumbnail sketch as to what would underlie your standard... church-based group Bible study, then it would be precisely what you are suggesting doing... [I]f you are going to gather people up... and take them on that planned route, then you have to gather them up where they're at. I suppose it's a bit like a coach trip... You pick up people from their houses. Whereas if you're dealing with the folk who have theological background, you can tell them to make their own way... And that's maybe the suitable method.

This is backed up by the observation of another minister with a background in adult education:

ND: If you can start, I've noticed with adults, if you can start with the experience – and people who perhaps have a fear of learning, returners... We used to have women returners coming to college in their thirties who hadn't studied since they were sixteen or whatever – and if you got them onto something they knew something about, then they were away. And I think that's perhaps the strength of that.

Significantly, the Thinker with least formal theological education did indeed find this use of experience helpful:

SW: Well, it worked for me, and I think it worked for others in the group. I think they were quite impressed; it was a different technique, a refreshing technique.

However, the strategy of 'experience first' does run the risk – and it is a severe one – of patronising and thus alienating Thinkers who are more academically trained.

Indeed, one of the few participants who found no value at all in community hermeneutics viewed the strategy in this light:

WT: I think one of the things that you've said there is, and I hope you didn't intend to say it the way it came over... that you're sugaring it, the pill, for the congregation. Now that is talking down to the group.

Their own preferred alternative would have been a direct reversal of the method:

WT: [F]or me the method has to be stood on its head... You have to do the study, do the comparisons, talk about the context and then bring it into the current, up-to-date; and start from the Bible and move to today, rather than start from today and try and slide back into the Bible.

Significantly, the most consistent Thinker who, on the whole, appreciated the method for its novelty, also underlined the use of text before experience as a greatly preferable option:

OA: [T]he only thing is that I would say from my point of view, is I prefer to go more forewarned. It's sometimes very good, especially from more of a work or academic process that you're not forewarned, in other words that it's coming from the spirit in there, but personally I would prefer to be forewarned of what particular section [we would study]... Perhaps that would be bad in the sense that we'd be going along paths that you wouldn't want us to go, but... certainly, if you're studying the Bible I prefer to know.

Historical-critical close study

As the original context of my question had indicated, the historical-critical study skills of examining Gospel parallels, the context of a passage and/or its relationship to the Hebrew Bible were new to most of my interviewees, though the ministers I interviewed had all used such techniques with church groups. A group of natural or trained Thinkers is the ideal target audience for this section of the study, since analytical skills are their forte, and novelty for them is also a highly acceptable feature of Bible study. One academic participant with little previous experience of Bible study underlined this:

NI: The most memorable thing for me was the take-home message... – or the message I took home – which was about how the text was addressing a particular audience, and how it was also the way in which... the order in which certain stories had been told, and trying to understand the motives of the author. That was a revelation to me. Because I was able to look at it in a much more analytical way, which I... hadn't realised before... it was advanced. Before we were just looking at sections of text and trying to understand what they mean, but that took it a step further. I was quite intrigued by that.

Illustrating hermeneutical techniques with recourse to the analogy of newspapers worked particularly well in the case of Gospel parallels. One participating couple with little theological education, trying the idea out on their non-Christian but degree-educated family, reported interesting results:

- S: And getting on to that second section, had you before come across the idea of looking at parallel passages in the different Gospels and seeing similarities and differences?
- AR: No. Now that I found particularly beneficial... we got on to discussing this last night round this little family dinner... I was trying to explain to all these knowledgeable people that we had all these passages from newspapers, who all had different readers. And that, they're not so ignorant that they didn't know what the Gospels were, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, so you were comparing – this is my interpretation of it – their readers to the readers of these newspapers... Well, they all grasped that instantly... And one of them had at one point said, The Bible contradicts itself... Now that's often something people say... That is one thing I have once or twice thought about, not dwelled on it, but I've thought, Why is Matthew's writing different from Luke's on that passage? And I've heard so many explanations... about paperwork being lost, and interpretations being wrong and all the rest of it; and that made perfect sense. And you think, Why did I never think about that? And they could all relate to that point.

Thinkers who have a fair amount of Bible study behind them are apt to focus on the historical background of the texts, because 'If it's the Gospels, then I'm going to assume that I've read them frequently enough not to want the story, because I know that already' (NG). Thus historical-critical focus on the texts is likely to provide the novelty they look for in study. For Thinkers starting with less study background, however, the close reading required to pick up relatively small discrepancies in detail within the Gospel narratives can prove a drawback:

- S: [D]id [the study] give you some idea of the people who wrote [the Gospels] and their different points of view, and the people they were written for?
- AW: I didn't think enough about it.
- S: You're allowed to say, No, it didn't!
- AW: Yeah, but the trouble is, the main thing, you know, you wouldn't think about it: concentrating on the passage itself, you wouldn't think of the background.

The 'expert' aspect of leadership on which Thinkers depend is an ambivalent factor here, given its potential to enable or to disable group members. The expert's role in opening up such questions can be a positive one:

EP: [If I'm studying on my own] I don't even see the signals in the bit I'm reading. Not as we did with you. I mean... I don't think I would really have thought about looking at... what went before and what went after the passage. And whether that was different in the two pieces we were reading. So that was new to me. And... I wouldn't have done that if I'd been on my own.

Yet demonstrations of expertise can also lead to participants feeling inadequate:

S: But back to our studies. Do you think it's changed the way you're going to be reading the Gospels in future?

DT: I think I'd find it hard to find the comparison verses.

However, given the right tools, you can't keep a good Thinker down, as the same speaker demonstrates:

S: Ah. Now, there are cribs, of course... I can't remember whether I showed round my book of parallels. There's a book where someone's written out all the stories, starting off with Matthew in one column, and then it's got Mark in the next column, Luke and John, so that you can see, written out, what the differences are.

DT: Right. What I've done before, I have the NIV Study Bible... And it gives little bits where there are similar passages.

S: Ah. Yes. That's another way.

DT: But it's probably not as good as your way. It's not bad... And until I got that, it was even harder.

Once Thinkers see the value of this new study method, moreover, they are likely to pursue it:

EP: I hadn't really realised the need to look at what was said in Mark and I've taken the main... point of... what I was reading, [the] [m]oral point, if you like, or whatever, about one's life, out of it, but I hadn't really thought it through.

Connection

While in a local-church context Thinkers see some point in trying to correlate the results of their analysis with experience, they are less worried about the success of such correlation. Where a connection was made, the mechanism of the universal human story might be noted:

AW: [T]aking the passage when Jesus came to visit... and the other one was feeling a bit cheated and left out that she was doing all the work and that [the story of Martha and Mary], that does happen, and it is a true story in life to this day...

S: So that sort of connection, you can think of, Oh, I know Marys and I know Marthas, or as I think you were saying at the time, there's a bit of each of them in all of us –

AW: Aha. Yes, I think they did get that relationship right.

However, more frequently the connection, in groups largely composed of Thinkers, was adjudged to have failed:

NG: I'm not sure that we were terribly successful, actually... Obviously there was some success, because if you tease out the nature of the community which is addressed in the Gospels, the primary addressee... then obviously this enables you to say, yes I agree with that or no I don't, yes I've experienced something similar or no I haven't. So that follows, as it were, at different levels of awareness. Sometimes quite subconscious, sometimes quite articulately expressed... I think possibly it came and went a little. There were moments when one felt that this kind of connection had been established, and other moments when it hadn't.

The points where connection was not established largely came down to incompatibilities in context:

NG: And of course one of the difficulties is that if the Gospel story is very highly contextualised in, say eating bread and fish on a mountainside picnic, or walking on the water... If there's a very, very highly contextualised Gospel experience, which can't really be as easily contextualised in the modern world, then it is quite hard to make a connection, unless one goes beyond the context and into motivation and into the nature of experience, into a much more psychosocial sort of study.

Such a psychosocial solution to the problem might call for a mode of Bible study similar to that pioneered by Walter Wink (see Chapter 1). Having dealt with historical-critical questions, one seeks to contact one's inner Pharisee and inner tax collector: a mode of study well suited to the individualistic aspect of the Thinking worldview.

However, since the ideas generated by the close-reading, analytical section of community hermeneutics are the main focus of Thinkers' attention, though they appreciate the logical follow-through of later parts of the programme, they have less motivation to make these successful:

NI: I can't quite remember the precise details of what we discussed, but whether it was successful or not, I thought it was a worthy endeavour... it was good to try to relate the stories addressed to that audience to us.

Appropriation

From a Thinker's perspective, the success of Bible study groups – defined as a connection made between the participants' lives and the Gospels – largely depends on engaging and satisfying their analytic interest in the texts concerned:

S: Did you find that the endeavour to draw out information about the communities behind the Gospel texts... worked?

NG: Yes, that's an interesting point. 'Which worked' – what do you mean by 'worked'?

S: Did you find that – I suppose there's two questions there, really, aren't there? Firstly, was it a question that you were interested in, finding out what these communities behind the Gospel texts were like, and secondly, if you did think it was a question worth asking, did you feel your curiosity about these communities was somewhat satisfied by this method of study?

NG: Well, yes, first of all it always is interesting to know what sort of community is behind the story, because that in a sense explains the story, and what would be true for one type of community wouldn't necessarily be so effective in another. And that was particularly marked in the different discourse styles that were used... in the different Gospels. So I was fine about that. Yes, it was interesting and productive, because it aroused my curiosity and caused me to question in a way that perhaps I haven't done before, so yes, that was

interesting and new. And... I think that was because of the comparative technique. It wouldn't have been nearly so interesting just doing that on one piece.

Since study in itself is so nourishing to Thinkers, there is no pressure towards action as a result of study:

NT: [T]he groups that I've worked with in congregations have... been fairly active in relation to the Bible study, gathering in groups, but that study has been food for the journey, really. I can't recall any occasion when a Bible study group has decided to – as a group – make a decisive action.

Queries about action, as opposed to insight, arising from group study, therefore, tend to draw a blank with Thinkers:

S: [W]ould you say that the groups we've done together, the people from three churches, made any difference to those churches looking to work more closely together?

OA: Er, well, personally I don't think so. Personally I don't think so. Perhaps I might be just cynical, having seen the whole process over years and years and years.

A group engaging with real and troubling situations where no action resulted can still be adjudged successful, so long as learning has occurred:

S: Specifically, we [the group] were looking for situations where we were frustrated and powerless and didn't know what to do. Do you think at the end of it...we were any further on with those situations through having gone through this process?

NI: Well... maybe not. Maybe we didn't get much closer. But on the way I learned a lot.

In any case, Thinkers remain to be convinced that action is the correct response to study.

NI: I wouldn't want to be led into the belief that every problem is going to have a solution.

This caution is amplified in the approach of a Thinking minister to the general question of the appropriateness of action as a result of study:

- HG: [In] the action-reflection cycle, there comes a point when you have to say, Well, does all this actually change anything? Before you move on into the next cycle. So yes, I think it was a perfectly valid thing to me. And many people would raise criticism that it is precisely that that is missing in the majority of Bible study exercises.
- S: But again, practically speaking, in the sessions we were engaged in... if there'd been a box to fill in at that point, do you think there would have been anything to write in a box [labelled] 'Action'?
- HG: Oh, I think there might have been... [T]o what extent people would actually have been committed to that action is different. It might have been, Well, you know, that gives us an idea, this is something we might possibly be thinking about and doing. I don't think there's anything that people would... fall over each other to get to the door to start into. But that's actually better... because it seems to me that the real action/reflection model success rate is often a function of the way in which the action phase is faithful to the reflection phase, and not just an emotional response to it... So to translate that into Bible study terms, if at the end of the Teach study we had said, 'Right, let's get so-and-so to teach this within the church school context: Go for it!' Well, I don't think that's a real measure of action.
- S: More a knee-jerk reaction?
- HG: More knee-jerk, more emotionally driven. Nothing wrong with being emotionally driven, except that... considered planning is more... the context that I'm working in.

On reflection, the same interviewee determined that theological and personal factors also came into play:

- S: Would this sort of [study] process be something to think [church decisions] through?
- HG: Yes, I think it should be. I mean, I think it actually should be a tool which is always available to a group of church leaders, whether that be Presbytery, Area Council, Kirk Session, Sunday school staff, whatever, in an ideal world. But we're just not very good at actually either having the resources for doing it or the inclination to think that it might be helpful. But it clearly, when you think about it, could be helpful and should be available. And I would imagine that in some congregations it probably is. Not necessarily in the ones where we are... the difference that occurred to me [is] between the more experiential-based group of Christians and the more traditional worship-based group of Christians. Just a guess... Where there is... more of a sense of the dynamic intervention of God in the hour-by-hour life of the church...
- S: Whether the way to go is through church session and then through Presbytery and then to a committee and then back again and so on, or whether it's a question of, Let's grab a group and look at the Bible and see what it says?
- HG: Yes, See what the Spirit does to us. You know, that second way around, I would not feel comfortable with, on no other grounds than that I feel uncomfortable with it... I'm not talking about a reasoned... judgment on that line of approach to decision-making in churches whatsoever. I mean reason

tells me that it's actually a very valid way of discerning what one should do next, what a group, a congregation should do next.

S: But your gut feeling...

HG: My gut feeling is not that way. That's because of my upbringing and life so far.

Though there may be no expectation of group action, the Thinker may well consider the possibility of action in terms of individual personal change, which may not be appropriate to share within the group:

HG: [T]he response is either, I suppose, personal to the individual or a response from the group. And what I've been talking about in the last five minutes is a response from the group. But of course there's the whole area of response from the individual, which might in fact be quite insignificant in terms of the great plan of the universe, but for them might be quite significant. But of course the question then becomes, working in the group, to what extent it's helpful and appropriate for that to be shared. If you're moving from a group dynamic to a personal dynamic as the outcome, then there may be personal commitments, personal decisions, personal plans which are really best left personal.

Here the Thinker's individualism is underscored again: mutual support and solidarity are not seen as appropriate functions of a study group. One response, however, through which Thinkers can combine learning and action is using one's newly gained knowledge of the biblical texts as a resource for discussion with others:

NI: I just need consolidation and I feel the need to equip myself with more knowledge, so that I can defend my position... I've made a conscious decision to become a Christian, so therefore it'd be good if I could defend that to other people that I came across, if I wanted to have a debate with them about that subject. [N]ot that I'm going to use the Bible to bash down their arguments. Just so that it's a resource for knowledge.

A Thinking minister also observes this process in others:

S: In what ways would you look for transformation [as a result of Bible study]? What areas might you see it?

GT: Areas that I've seen it, is where people have, over time, become more confident and able to describe their faith, they just acquire the language of faith. They're able to, they're not frightened... to state things in terms of their faith. It's always a wonderful thing when you've never heard someone talk

and ask things about their faith, and suddenly they do... And I think part of house groups and education gives them the confidence.

Appraisal

As a resource for knowledge, the Thinking approach to Bible study is eminently suited to historical-critical analysis of the texts. Such analysis has historically been understood as potentially destructive of faith; Thinkers themselves may assume this on behalf of others:

NI: [The method can be] controversial in that when you start to take something apart, it becomes more weak, it loses its authority, it stops being the word of God, it starts being written by a human being for a particular audience.

In reality the opposite effect may be produced:

S: Had you come across before the idea of comparing one of the stories in two of the Gospels?

AT: I'd done that a little bit... I find that fascinating. That's one of the things that really interests me is seeing just how different they are... You know, I'd never taken on board the fact that Mark never mentioned the birth... until the last couple of years, and I thought, Gosh, that's amazing. Because you're so used to the standard stories coming up at Advent, you know... Out of Luke. We... tend to read the same passages... And so these stick in your mind... And that is when it hit me that they were very different.

However, horror stories also arise of groups in which pleasure in analysis

has overcome both charity and common sense. Here is one example offered by a

Relating minister:

ND: [I]n the group there was me, the Church Secretary, a retired minister and two or three of the older ladies and one who was a more middle-aged lady. And the trouble was... the minister and the retired minister got hijacked into deep theological discussions... And it was horrendous. And the words that were being used! And then the middle-aged lady... just decided that it was far too highbrow and she wasn't going to do any of this again. And... it was completely hijacked by the ministers, so, you know, sometimes I get a bit wary, because... that's not the point. And they lost me at one point as well, and I'd just come out of college, and I thought, What is this going on?... We're not having a quiz as to who can say the longest words from theological discussions. That, I think, was the worst.

Even where the contrast between learned and unlearned is not so extreme, the

Thinking stress laid on the role of the expert can inhibit group members, as another minister describes:

TC: [People] don't want to display their ignorance. Which again is a reason why I don't like leading Bible studies, because they're less likely to ask, whereas they'll ask another person like themselves... They're much more likely to share a question or a doubt with someone else, perhaps not the minister, in case they look silly. As if we know the answers!

Some ministers may be unaware of this inhibiting aspect of their role, described here by a congregational member who is highly competent in their own profession:

WT: [Y]ou can tease and all the rest of it, but when push comes to shove, [he] is the minister... You don't want to say anything silly, you don't want to appear completely stupid, and you're not going to rubbish what he says.

Other ministers, by their assumptions, can reinforce the division between learned clergy and uninterested laity:

VT: I think many, most of our church people are not really concerned with the deeper things. I was talking to one, as it happened yesterday, I met a very important... member of the church, and who is very capable in every way, as far as it went. And what he said to me was... he thought he'd only read six theological books in his life... I took it that it was because he wasn't concerned with the... deeper study of theology. He was concerned with the practical, everyday importance, which I think is for most people very important.

Unfortunately, church members can also 'buy into' this division into the studious and the rest:

AR: There's a lot of people in our church who... when SW and I said we were going to the Bible study... very few of the Elders came, and one of the Elders, who is a saint... said to me, 'I'm not a scholar, A'... And I said, 'You don't have to be a scholar.' But he lives it!... And I know that he and his wife, every night his wife M, who is a lovely lady, they sit up in bed together and they read a passage together... But they feel they've not got the learning to come in, and I think that's a shame and I know a lot of people like that, who feel this would be a very learned thing to do, that scholars do... And while we believe in it, we don't really want to come into this group of scholars, which we're not!

The assumption that Bible study is a matter purely of scholarship is a category error to which natural or trained Thinkers are also prone:

NT: The worst experience I ever had was working with a group of academics in my own congregation, where the desire to score intellectual points off one another... [r]eally got in the way of any decent discussion. We had two or three Greek scholars, and they were arguing about the particular meaning of a small word in a Gospel, and the thing was lost, really, the focus was gone. Those who were not skilled in the particular field were excluded, and it becomes a seminar, not a Bible study... Very difficult... to stop them from going into seminar mode, instead of me trying to say, this is Bible study, worship mode, development mode.

From the deficiencies of a mode of Bible study which uses Thinking alone, we therefore turn to the second paradigm of study, in which worship and development are given their due: Relating.

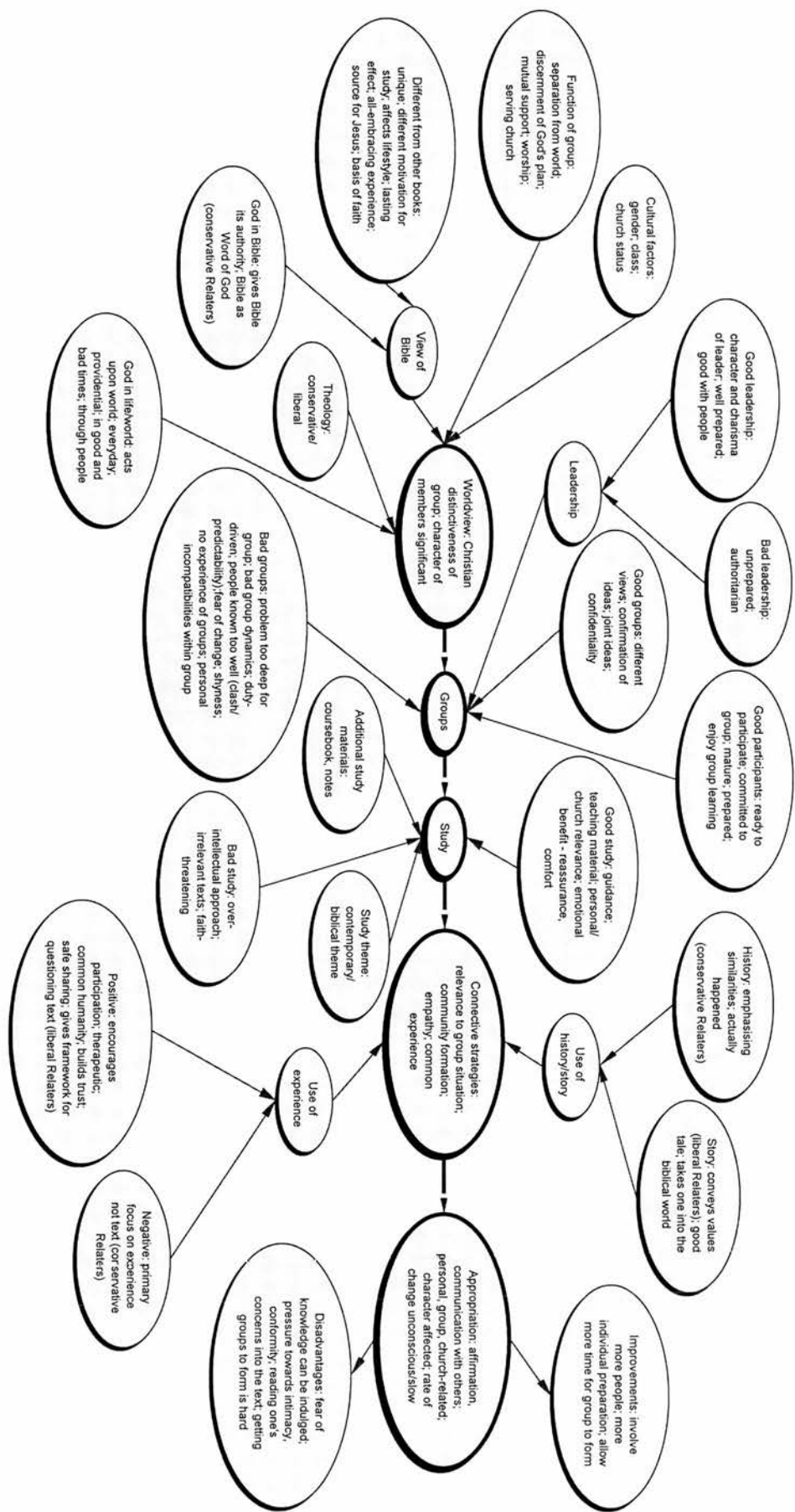


FIG. 7: RELATER

6. The Relater: Bible study for values

AR: *I'm speaking for myself, I have to feel comfortable with the people I'm with, and I have to feel that somehow or another they're just a little bit on my wavelength... in my approach to it.*

S: *Right. And so it's really the personal relationships and dynamic that makes or breaks a study group for you?*

AR: *Yeah. I think that's probably what I could say about my life, really. That's how I just approach everything, how I feel about all the things that I do.*

The group gains a life of its own

It may be a few weeks, a few months or even a few years further on: the fictional Bible study group described has become an entity in its own right. It may well have migrated from the church hall into someone's home: maybe that of the couple with young children who find getting babysitters a problem, or that of the group member with the most central house, or the largest meeting room. A variety of chairs jostle each other in the interstices of the three-piece suite. Older members make a beeline for the dining chairs, to have a fighting chance of getting up again; younger ones sink luxuriously into the sofa. Children's voices may be heard from another room. Tea, coffee and biscuits appear as before, though the biscuits may – if the group is lucky – have turned into home-made cake. Instead of the frozen silence of a group of people who don't know each other very well, the air is filled with a hubbub of voices asking after Mrs X's back, checking up on the Ys' holiday last week, finding out why Z wasn't in church last Sunday. It may be all the leader can do to attract their attention; but then the Bibles are brought out, as are hymnbooks. Someone moves to the piano, and the meeting begins in song and/or prayer.

Such a scenario describes a longer-term Bible study group, within the Reformed tradition an even rarer animal than the specially convened variety. The previous

generation of churchgoers, or maybe their parents, would be accustomed to the idea of social life being built around the church, from Bible study to amateur dramatics or hill walking. One survivor of this attitude, the so-called Young People's Fellowship, may still be going, with its committed core of septo- and octogenarians. But these days it is countercultural, even within the church, to commit oneself to a long-term group where relationships and not just tasks have become the focus, where community as well as knowledge is sought. Ministers may look with some suspicion on such groups – what rebellion against church order may be brewing within their ranks? – though they would be better advised to see them as a church resource.

Yet for its members, a small group in which one can relate closely to one's fellows is an attractive proposition in these days of congregations gathered by car from widely separate neighbourhoods, of nuclear family and single-person households, of isolation and loneliness even within the body of Christ. A group of Relaters comes together to study the Bible, certainly, but they come for more than that.

S: [M]y first question is, when you go to a Bible study, before you get there, what sort of things are you hoping for, what are you expecting to find?

IG: Fellowship, an encounter with God within the group.

Worldview

Describing participants in Bible study as Relaters does not imply that they are cerebrally challenged, merely that Relating concerns are more central to their study experience. Demographically, more women than men seem to be Relaters.

Experienced participants in Bible study are more likely to use Relating as a primary study mode than beginners, tied into the Thinking mode of banking education.

While on first joining a study group, Thinking may seem the safest mode in which to proceed, when one has gained more confidence and some acquaintance with one's

fellow seekers after knowledge, Relating begins to play a more significant role.

Consequently, the life of the group having developed to a much greater extent,

Relaters understand the purposes of a Bible study group much more broadly than do Thinkers.

AN: I think the sheer importance of group work in general is not [understood] nearly... enough in churches... If you want to try and involve everybody in the congregation more... I can see that the little groups... are so comfortable and non-challenging for people to come back in... To find out what Christians are talking about, you know, how are we coping with these things... And unless you take on your own spiritual growth – and not many people do... I think a group could do that.

Thus the Bible study group may take over some characteristics of the wider church.

It functions as a source of mutual support and belonging, as secular groups cannot:

S: Do you think if you were studying something else other than the Bible, you'd still have this supportive function within the group? Or is it specifically that it's Bible study that knits the group in that way?

IG: I suppose if it's a Christian group, it could be... it possibly could be supportive. I wouldn't be convinced if it wasn't a Christian group... But it's difficult to know.

AR: I find it hard to be in groups that it's not all about... Christianity... You know, I find it hard to be in groups outwith the church, because I never really feel I'm on the wavelength of other people... And that's probably me. It's not them.

Again, for Relaters a Bible study group is a place in which God's action in the ethical dimension of one's everyday living may be discerned and shared:

SG: I like to think that if you're open enough, then God has got a plan, for not just the broad bit of your life, but the details if you like as well. I think that's where housegroup is helpful, because it can remind you about that... and maybe more housegroup than just individual study, because if you are sharing with each other, you maybe have to articulate where God's been at work during the week.

I remember being taught a lesson when I was driving along, and again getting very impatient, because there was a queue of traffic that hadn't left a space for me to turn right, and I just went and made a face at the person who had thoughtlessly stopped there. And it turned out to be T in housegroup!...

I think God was teaching me a lesson... I thought, Well, it shouldn't make any difference who it is, whether I know them or not, but that'll teach me!

Such a group can provide a check on the more problematic aspects of seeking revelation in ordinary life. Understandably, Relaters look for spiritual and emotional benefit from Bible study:

AR: [I]t [Bible study] just came at the right time of refocussing us back on totally what we believe in. And even the session of starting to talk about prayer, I had kind of forgotten, I mean I have remembered loads more things since, but I had forgotten all the answers to prayer that we had had... And that's why I found it healing.

DT: [I look for] an understanding of the Scriptures. And then an understanding [of] the meaning of life, if you like. [B]eing very self-centred, comfort!

However, ministers are professionally aware of the problems which may arise from unmoderated moulding of the biblical texts to personal need:

S: What would moderate the dangers of [the] 'I've suddenly got a 999 call from the Almighty' approach?

TT: Right. The fact that Jesus taught us to say 'Our Father' and not 'My Father'.

S: So it would be something that you'd then open to the group, 'What does everyone else think?' That sort of approach?

TT: Yes. Christian faith, I think, happens in community, happens in relationship... It doesn't happen – although there's an individual aspect to it, a personal aspect rather than an individual aspect – it doesn't happen individually... [I]t happens personally: I am personally addressed or called or drawn. But I know myself as a person only in relation to other people. So that would be for me the moderating aspect.

Equally, experienced Relating students of the Bible will be sensitive to the need for group moderation:

AN: If you're down, and you read the Bible, you're looking for something, you're looking for the reasons why you might be down, or why does this happen... But if you're very calm and everything's going fine and you're looking at your Bible and you're reading a passage, you see the lighter side to it. So there's a psychological aspect [of] where you are in your life when you're reading the Bible as to how you interpret it. And I think that's why it's very good to have Bible notes or to have other people discussing... Because I think your own psychology, you can try and read out of it what you want... What you feel you need. And sometimes that can be comforting, but you know, I think there's a danger in that as well.

The group can also be a location in which God is directly experienced: worship takes place and gifts can be exercised:

DB: And house groups... actually give you a chance on a small scale to be leading some form of worship... It may be singing, or a prayer, or the study itself – which is, on a different level, a kind of preaching and saying what you think the Bible is saying.

While pneumatology did not play an extensive role in my fieldwork, where the Spirit was invoked it was by Relaters:

IJ: We all had some – well, there must have been something about all of us that we had in common... We must have felt at ease with one another... perhaps it was the Holy Spirit was able to come out... I think there was quite a bit of Spirit in our group, wasn't there?... I think everybody was happy... to talk about their experiences without feeling inhibited.

While flowing naturally from Relaters' view of the group as a micro-church, emphasis on worship and prayer within the group can run counter to the expectations of the larger ecclesial body:

DB: [M]ost people have no experience at all [of open prayer], and it's a great shame. I've heard one church elder saying once, when asked, would he pray with a family he was visiting: Oh, no, no, I leave that to the experts – I leave that to the professionals – meaning the paid minister. I think the ordinary church member or church meeting member has no encouragement to take part in prayer at all.

Thus the theology of church as the gathered people of God, and, by analogy, of the group as a small church, is strong for Relaters:

SG: [I]f you think of the church just being wherever God's people are gathered together, then yes, on a microcosm, yes, I suppose [the group] is. On a very small scale. Yes, you could say that.

The group may even supplant the larger body in terms of depth of belonging and potential for participation:

DW: I think I get a lot more out of the group than when I've gone to church. The church is, the people I meet at church, it's mostly on a social level.

SG: Well, I suppose you don't get involved in sort of spiritual decision-making at all, if you're not an elder, not on the Session. And if you're not on the Board, you don't get involved in the... fabric side of things and the decision-making there. I think in small groups you can feel you belong...

It is also, in the more conservative group observed, non-permeable: distinct from the outside world.

IG: I suppose what I'm thinking is, you're coming from the everyday busy world... To be more focussed... It's a bit like going to church... or a bit like your own quiet time... It also takes you away from the distractions that are in everyday life, though you take your everyday life with you, to a certain extent, because you're using that in your discussions.

Both conservative and liberal Relaters' primary focus is on relationships within the group. The parting of the ways between more conservative Relaters and more liberal ones may be seen in where they understand authority to reside in the process of interpretation. Conservative Relaters primarily make sense of their lives by means of the biblical texts, rather than vice versa.

SG: I think probably we've tended to use the housegroup as a chance to get to know the Bible better... And apply it to other things, rather than taking the other thing and then going at it... from that side.

The application of the Bible to contemporary issues may not always be an easy option. Where there are divergences of opinion, however, these are seen as temporary staging posts on the way to future unanimity.

S: [D]oes it ever happen that in a housegroup you've got two people and one says, Well the Bible clearly says this about whatever it is, and the other says, Well, no, I don't think so, I think the Bible says that?

SG: Yes... I think there's always room for people's different interpretations. And I think that's a healthy thing. Because there's very little specifically in the Bible about a lot of modern-day issues, for example... And that's what housegroups are for, to explore what we think the Bible is saying... I think sometimes, you don't go away with, This is the answer. I think it's a case of, Well, let's just keep praying that we'll be shown what the right way is in this for us now.

The desire to find – if only eventually – *the* right way through any given situation is characteristic of conservative Relaters. The gathered group itself is also a crucial resource for their journey of faith, as it is for more liberal ones:

- S: [M]y first question is, When you go to a Bible study, any Bible study, what is it you look for? What are you hoping to find?
- ND: I think it's the very idea of... a group of people... coming together, to study, to read and to learn, to know more, you know, to help us, I think and to assist us on that journey that we do. And obviously for me the Bible is important... And I think that, to gather around it together is – I think it's that. It's the gathering around the Word together that I find gives me the buzz in going to a Bible study.

The understanding of Bible study as in some sense mediating God to the student is common to all Relaters:

- AR: I think in a group studying the Bible, there is, it can be a very spiritual experience... And you can go home feeling spiritually uplifted, or spiritually depressed.
- DW: [I]t's a different thing altogether, I think [from studying Shakespeare], you've got the aspect of prayer and you feel that God's present, bring[ing] Christ into the meeting, as it were. So yes, it's a different, an extra dimension...

For liberal Relaters, the Bible is different from other books because of its narrative and its ethical content:

- SI: [It gives] us the history of Christianity in the Old Testament and then translat[es] that into Christ's example and, you know, the whole Christian way of life.

For more conservative Relaters, the Bible's authority is also stressed:

- DW: [T]he Christian believes that the Bible's [something] you should be... bas[ing] your life on... Whereas the Shakespeare discussion is just a discussion about character and the play and so on, there's nothing personal involved... [p]ersonal commitment, or lifestyle.
- S: So when you're studying the Bible it actually should have or can have an effect on the rest of your life outside your study?
- DW: It should do. Yes, yes. It shouldn't be just an academic exercise.

Stress on the necessary influence of Bible study on how we live our lives is characteristic of Relaters, a feature of their textual appropriation strategy to which we will return. However, this relies on their understanding of God's revelation in everyday life. Unlike Thinkers, it is evident that Relaters do look for revelation outside the Bible. How do they see God at work?

Some tend to look for God more when things go wrong:

S: [W]ould you, as a general rule, in your life, look at the things that are happening in your life and ask, Where's God at work in this?

WA: Sometimes... Not always, but sometimes. Sometimes things... are good already, it never crosses my mind. But when things go pear-shaped, you begin to say it... You tend not to bother when things are going well.

Others associate good things that have happened:

HT: [Y]ou know, thinking about it, as I say, I've known he's always with me. He's always there. He always assists me... I mean, I've been blessed with good health, I've been blessed with strength... like everybody else I've got something wrong with me, but still, as I aye say... well, I look back in my life and see it, and he has walked beside me.

or people they have known:

SI: [It] is an unfolding process, faith and life; that's one of the very good things, but it's also people as well, particular people coming into your life, I think, who help enormously, just making you feel, well, yes, there is something to this belief thing.

with God's providential care for them. Still others desire to see the best in the mixed situation they have been given:

DT: And I have faith that, OK, things aren't maybe what we aspire to, but I should make do with what's here, make the best of what I have, and enjoy.

All these responses have in common an attitude of passive acceptance vis-à-vis

God's activity: divine presence or absence is gauged by what God has done for or to the interviewee. A more active human role is described in the desire to find out how

God wants one to behave in a given set of circumstances, yet here too God shows us how to react to a situation rather than speaking to us by means of it:

DB: I don't think it's so much something that happens in my working life or my leisure life that has itself a message. But there may be situations in which I can apply my Christian faith. I think... I think I'd say, rather than expect the situation to have its own message to me... I would be thinking in a mental, prayerful way: 'Look, God, I'm in this situation: could you just see me through it? Show me the right responses.' And so I think I'm looking to God as the source of ideas that I might use in the situation... rather than expecting the situation to be the inspiration for what to do.

This is tempered by the realisation that we cannot control everything that happens to us, and so must leave the initiative to God:

IG: I think that's where faith comes in. You know, if there's something, seeking God in your everyday life, his guidance... I think it's my experience of bringing up a family, and 'What's the best way here?' In a way, you're handing your children back to God; he's given them to you but... we're human, we can only do so much, but we can trust God that he'll lead them where he will.

In the attempt to discern God's plan behind unexplained suffering in the wider world, human character formation on a larger scale can become a focus of divine activity:

AT: I've just finished a study where I was looking at cot death in infants... So naturally when I was visiting parents to discuss... I had to be... ready for those kind of questions, although... it wasn't on a religious basis that I was going... And some of those stories were so horrific... But I have to say... I don't look to blame God for things... I'm not about to say, And where was God when this was happening? Why is he letting it happen?... There's so much that goes on, that I feel things happen for a reason... I mean for one thing, I think there has to be – sounds very cruel – there has to be an element of disability and there has to be dreadful disasters and everything... Because... otherwise without that you have no compassion. You've got to learn compassion to be a human being.

What is absent from Relaters' view of God at work, however, is the endeavour to look for or align oneself with God's transformative activity already prevenient in the world.

What do Relaters gain from study?

For Relaters, their study must have relevance to life, of a more personal and concrete kind than the cerebral interest found by Thinkers in a good idea. Of course, where academic input is unavailable, as in many churches, such personal relevance may well be the only criterion by which good Bible study can be judged:

AR: Most of the Bible studies that I have – well, in fact, all of the Bible studies that I've ever attended – have been made up of groups of individuals, and have often not had a minister present. So basically all we have done... has been to work through a passage and to look for something for ourselves from that passage... [I've] [n]ever really done it from a theological angle... it's been more a personal thing... with shared experience, personal experiences of the people there.

Unlike Thinkers, Relaters do want Bible study to provide answers to life's questions:

HT: I'm a Bible reader, I read the Bible every night. Since I became a Christian I've read my Bible every night, because I always remember the man... who led me to be converted always said, 'Read your Bible and you'll find an awful lot of answers.'

This also applies to Relaters with training in the academic side of Bible study, for example this minister:

VT: Well, I think good Bible study has been in the sense that I've often found in study, sometimes – also, I must admit, in situations where someone, a minister, has been preaching or whoever's been talking – I've often found that quite unexpectedly a particular study will have for me a kind of solution... to problems that I have or thoughts that I have.

Such relevance can tie into daily living in a very practical way. Note how in the first, more conservative example of this, the group's experience is described as reinforcing the study undertaken, even though the experiential component is chronologically prior:

SG: One [Bible study] that I've enjoyed, that I've remembered, is when we did something practical, when we all took something along with us, an ingredient for a cake. We'd decided, the week before, who would bring what... So when

we arrived, we pooled our ingredients, we went to the kitchen, we made the cake... Then we came through and we looked at the passage on being part of a body... Then we went back, checked if the cake was ready, and let it come out of the oven for ten minutes or so and then we had it to eat together. And it reinforced the study that we were doing, that everybody can bring something that's necessary, even though it's all quite different.

In the second, more liberal example of Relating, the specific ethical situation under discussion is considered prior to the text, interpretation of which aims to throw light on it:

GT: [R]ecently I had a morning service, the early morning service which has a Bible study aspect to it... and usually there's three or four contributors... out of about fifteen or twenty people there, but there was one I'd been discussing partly through a book, *Godless Morality* by Richard Holloway... And... I looked at a very specific issue, which was one of the examples he gave, about adultery, in connection with [a partner with dementia] – is it adultery, is it not adultery? And... it just exploded into conversation, it was quite amazing, it was an issue on which everyone present felt they had an opinion...

S: And was this linked in any way with the Bible reading that morning?

GT: Yes, we were looking at... Proverbs. What we were trying to do was look at how we do morality. How do we do morality education by a sermon? To what extent is the Bible prescriptive?... And the passage from Proverbs [concerned] adult education... [probably Proverbs 4:13: 'Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.'] And the idea that it also talks about being mature... what we were trying to grasp here was an argument that what Proverbs was saying was the way to deal with all moral situations was... an education to inform morality... So it's a question of how to try and get the Bible to speak to situations now for which the Bible has no exact parallel...

Connections made between different parts of Scripture are also satisfying in Relating Bible study:

AT: I'm looking to the theology side of [Bible study]... Because I'm interested in how it came together as well as the actual content... I'm interested in, when certain bits, you know, where they connect up... like the Old Testament fits in with the New Testament.

ND: [A]nother [study] was John Chapter 3, and suddenly... it was that bit of it where it says Moses raised up the bronze snake in the desert... And [the leader] said, Right, we're back in here, and we found the Old Testament bit, and I suddenly thought, Wow, this all fits together.

Bad study, from Relaters' point of view, occurs when jargon is allowed to obscure a living experience of God, as this Relating minister eloquently describes:

VT: [O]riginally... our life in the church and our thoughts about theology... was based upon our experience... Ah, but then when we went on to try to put this experience into words... our description of the experience became perhaps not quite so... accurately describing the experience... Words were inadequate and we were unable to do it. And this might not have been too bad a thing. But the difficulty was that once they got into words, and once we began to move away from the face-to-face relationships of people... those words got written down and passed around, and then we became studiers of the words.

Discussion for the sake of it is not appreciated, either:

SI: [I]t is quite nice, obviously, to talk around a smaller group about thoughts on a particular... matter, but there didn't seem to be then leading back very well to what the whole project was all about.

This can lead to Relating uneasiness with academic approaches to study:

DT: I probably don't know as much as... the people who have written the big, what's the big books?... The commentaries. I can never remember that name. But some of these are far too complicated for me!... I'm sure it's of use to someone who's going to be a minister and is meeting different people, but I don't want my Bible to be as complicated as that... I'm looking for simple meanings, the meanings that matter to me.

HL: And if you maybe don't have what you consider to be... a deep theological background in terms of interpretation and learning, if things are presented in a way that... you don't feel you have the knowledge, skills and ability to participate, then... do you know what I mean? It comes over as too intellectual.

Study is also problematic for Relaters if they find it hard to discover relevance to life in the chosen texts:

EB: I found the Apocrypha very difficult and rather boring... I couldn't connect it with anything, you know?

How does a group of Relaters work?

It is almost a truism to stress what a significant role group dynamics plays in Bible study for Relaters, as the following description of church study groups still in existence after twenty years or more attests:

GT: [S]omething about Bible study groups in this church is that the fellowship is absolutely critical... that's what binds them together.

Relaters, more than Thinkers, tend to appreciate the mode of learning offered by a group situation. This may partly be because one is strongly encouraged to focus by the expectations of participation fostered by membership of a group:

WA: [A lecture] can often just pass you by because you're thinking about something completely different: 'What am I going to do this afternoon? I hope the weather stays dry, I'm going to cut the grass,' or something like that. But if you're going to a Bible study group that's participative, you'll concentrate more.

S: Because otherwise the leader will say, What do you think, W?

WA: And I'll say, I hope it stays dry this afternoon! Yes.

This stress on participation can be another aspect of the group as substitute for church:

IG: I think I see [the group] as more important than going to church on Sunday... Because every church I've ever been, there are people who are participative and non-participative... Whereas if you're in a Bible study group, it's very difficult to be non-participative... Because the group's only going to work if you contribute... Or work together within it.

Relationships of mutual regard established within the group are therefore highly important for Relaters, as much because of the character and example of others as for the cut and thrust of debate:

S: [W]hat is it about a group that's helpful?

IJ: It's the feedback... And just different people's experiences in similar situations... And perhaps they have had a relevant part within their Bible study that can help me.

SI: I find I benefit hugely from other people's strength of faith, and maybe that as much as gaining knowledge and insight.

Sharing emotions within a group – not a top priority for Thinkers – can be significant in building these relationships:

RD: Well, one of the best [study groups] was... from a Church of Scotland congregation... and it dealt with the story of Gideon, how he was hiding in the wine press, when an angel appeared and said, Now the Lord be with thee, thou mighty man of valour!... [T]here were... some set questions connected with the passage that we had, and one of them was, What does this teach us about God's timing and sense of humour? And one of the things I remember about it was that what everybody said was accompanied with laughter.

Confidentiality is also a crucial element in their fostering:

AN: We knew [the group] was confidential. That's very, very important... I mean, we always stress that all the time in our house groups, and I think that has to be important at the beginning.

Taking up the opportunity for confidential discussion depends to a large extent on relationships of trust built up with one's fellow group members. Yet the specially convened Bible study group, formed for a specific purpose with a limited lifespan, usually encounters only the first few dynamic stages a group must weather if it is to develop a longer-term existence. The groups I ran – of six sessions at most – were hampered by this provisionality:

WA: Once everybody has... had their one or two experiences of... 'Oh, I should have kept my mouth shut, I wish I hadn't said that,' after that, you're away. The group is ready to actually have its work begin... It takes some people longer to get to that point than other people.

Some participants put the lack of dynamic development during the specially convened groups' lifetime down to the absence of close relationships within the group:

S: If you were in a group, maybe, that met all the time, do you think that as you get to know people a bit better, is it easier to say things, or not necessarily?

AW: Yeah, I think if you know them before, it's easier. And you're comfortable with them, and then they're comfy back.

In the specially convened groups, however, where relationships were superficial at best, perception of what was actually going on within the group could vary widely.

Consider two disparate views of group dynamics within a study group composed largely of liberal Relaters. One participant with Changing tendencies admitted to a feeling of outsiderhood:

EP: [I]t takes time to find out what other people know and what stage they're at, and we never really managed to do that. I realise one lady had been a missionary and so I realised they were far ahead of me in some ways, and so I never even got sussed out the members of the group, and how I fitted into it. But then I came from outside, and I think they were saying, Why is she here?

Yet another member of the same group, a Thinker with Relating components, saw the group as homogeneous:

NG: In the group that we were... I think what was notable, absolutely notable, was that we were all really highly educated people... And therefore we'd no problems at all with that kind of situation [discussing experiences of teaching and being taught]. I think... had the group been less highly educated, or not educated much at all, then it would require perhaps a different angle.

Evidently misunderstanding and lack of communication can lurk beneath the surface of even the best-intentioned groups, especially given participants coming to the group with different preferences in study mode (see also further discussion on mixed groups in Chapter 10 and on misunderstanding in Appendix I). Commenting on the development of the same group, the Thinker noted:

NG: [B]y Session Four I think there was a kind of mutual confidence which was very interesting, because it enabled us to have a very interesting discussion which you probably remember, about proclamation... which I think would not have been possible had the group not already gelled together in a way that people were prepared to listen to each other. And I certainly think that carried over into Session Five where I felt that the group, the participants in the group, were listening to each other and responding to each other as much as they were responding to you.

The Changer, though, came away with a very different impression of the group dynamic:

- EP: I'm just trying to think of something on my mind... it's how a group will go from dependence on the leader through to independence, throw everything out and then come back to interdependence on each other and the leader; and I never felt that process worked.
- S: Right. It was still, as it were, me priming the pump every time?
- EP: Yes, yes. We were relying on you. So, as I say, I didn't think it worked.
- S: And do you think that was inevitable, given the style of Bible study we were doing? The dependence on the leader? Or do you think... if we'd had more practice at it, people would have been making the points themselves?
- EP: No, I don't think it was because we were dependent on you particularly. I think it was we never got to really working as a group because of people not coming. That was the big factor for me.

Only one of the specially convened study groups (Group 3) developed a sufficient degree of mutual commitment for its members to continue meeting after the group's allotted timespan; significantly, this group contained a large majority of Relaters.

Unfortunately my fieldwork could cover only the original period of group study.

In order to observe more of how Relaters can operate under 'steady-state' group conditions, therefore, it is helpful to consider the dynamics already established within the more conservative long-term study group observed (Group 7), a group made up without exception of people whose primary interpretative mode was Relating.

- DW: [Q]uite often we've studied a book of the Bible, we used to do that quite a lot, and then I remember we did these *Lifebuilders*... It's a Bible study group with a whole lot of different topics and series... Like parables and forgiveness or self-esteem, Jeremiah, various books as well and topics in different series... And basically there are probably about ten or twelve studies in the book... each week we would study, take a theme for a term from say now until Christmas... And do a chapter each week, as it were. There were Bible readings to be read and questions to be answered... That basically involved someone leading it, reading out the questions quite often and then we would discuss the questions, that person after a time would move on to the next question.

This description of a normal evening's study shows how a group of Relaters can locate expertise: in the interests of mutuality and equal participation, instead of importing a flesh-and-blood expert, the task of dispensing knowledge has been delegated to a study guide. In this instance the guide's theology is more conservative. A more liberal group might use instead one of the thematic guides relating to world issues put out by ecumenical bodies, where the intended conclusion is equally foregone or, indeed, Davies' and Vincent's guide to Mark's Gospel described in Chapter 1.

NG: [I]n the context of the Bible study booklets, or rather the Lent study booklets which many groups were using... and indeed in many a similar booklet, the idea is that yes, you are going to change. By the time you've been through this course you're going to have a different view about peace and justice issues, or about debt issues, or about illness or AIDS or whatever it was.

There are evidently advantages to such an approach. In a busy life, no one must spend hours researching a topic; moreover, no one feels one-down in the expert hierarchy. On the other hand, ceding power to a study guide's agenda has less satisfactory aspects:

DW: [W]hen we were doing the *Lifebuilders* series, we were studying the Bible to a certain extent, but at the same time it was what somebody thought about that aspect ... So... it wasn't just us looking at the Bible and asking questions for ourselves.

Dissatisfaction with the way this worked out was verbalised by several interviewees:

DB: Over the years we've done this in different ways. We've sometimes just looked at a book and thought about our reactions without any help, but more often we've used a study guide of some kind... Some of them come with really impressive names, published by well-known biblical publishing companies: you think, This must be good. And sometimes it isn't good. Sometimes the questions that are asked are very simple – maybe we've just missed the point of it, maybe it's our fault, but 'What did so-and-so say at this point?' Well, that's just saying that it's what we read. Sometimes... questions can be too simple. And we've sometimes given up in frustration at

not feeling we're learning anything new... We've just been directed to read the passage again.

Finding fault with the guide's authority, however, was usually expressed with some diffidence, followed quickly by an alternative explanation: either (as above) that the group may have missed the point of the questions, or (as below) that the leader's skills may have been at fault:

IG: The trouble is, I think, that when we've done the sort of thing that we tend to do, which leads us through a book of the Bible with study notes, sometimes it can get a wee bit just – you tend to think, Oh that's not relevant, you know, it's a bit wishy-washy. You know – and maybe you're guilty of doing it yourself? – you've got to look, if you're leading it, at what are the questions, and you maybe haven't prepared it as well, there's just a lack of stimulation to the questions...

This reaction to an unsatisfactory situation mirrors the passivity involved in Relaters' acceptance of God's action, whether providential or admonitory, in everyday life.

Rather than taking the initiative to change, one makes the best of what one has been given:

S: And in those sorts of circumstances, what do you do? Do you sort of grit your teeth and persevere with the questions, or do you throw them out of the window, and say, Well, I think this question's far more interesting?

IG: I think we kind of move on through them quickly, and just... think, well, there's good and bad in all human life... And there are things that work and things that don't work. Nothing is ever all perfect or all imperfect... And there are ways in which all things can help you.

Such a Relating attitude of conflict avoidance – graphically illustrated by the avoidance of disagreement even with the absent authority of a study-guide author – is described caustically by one Thinker in another group as 'Everyone was being *so* nice to everyone else'. When it came to community hermeneutics, however, this determined harmony had its drawbacks for the long-term Relating group observed (see discussion below).

Yet the positive aspects of mutual support within such a group also have wider implications for the group's life. Among the side-effects of a longer-term Bible study group including Relaters, whose members have grown to feel relatively comfortable about sharing something of themselves, are not only worship-related group activities but also socialising together. How this works out depends on the group's life-stage:

DB: I think you've formed a picture of what we've been like. For me it started fifteen to sixteen years ago. We all started out the group... with a bread and cheese and soup meal together... And that was... actually quite good. It was... just something else that made us feel very much part of a group... And we sat round a big table, and it was a bigger group and it was quite a crowd, just sharing all the events of the week together. But lifestyles have changed... I think people lived much closer together then... And people had to go right home and get their family meals ready, because not all the family was involved in this, and they had to come back out, and it really doesn't suit. But it was a good thing.

The mutual support offered by a Relating group, however, does not stop with changing circumstances:

DB: I would feel that the ideal unit is something like a Bible study group, where the people that make up that group have a kind of pastoral responsibility for each other... [SG] doesn't work full-time, and quite often not at all, she's free during the day, she goes out and if someone's not well takes food round and does some shopping for them... And you're aware of people's needs... It doesn't have to be the official person appointed to look after them... You just know what is going on in the group; you know when it's someone's birthday and you remember something... you see that everyone is looked after. And if there's a need, it is anticipated in some way; IG... will just turn up and say, Oh, we've been at our allotment and we've dug up some vegetables and here's something for you.

Leadership for Relaters

Given the Relating need for a supportive group atmosphere in which long-term relationships can safely be built up, good group leadership is valued as much by Relaters as by Thinkers, though for different competencies. Relaters tend to judge a leader by character and theology as much as by subject expertise:

AR: There are some ministers who tend to be more socially, when I say socially minded, I mean –

S: The sort of peace and justice attitude socially?

AR: Whereas others have a different emphasis... And I think through the years I've selected the bits that I personally think are the most important... [T]here has been once or twice in my life, when I have found out that a particular minister... has turned out to be very much less as a person than I might have thought, I find it hard to accept anything I have ever learned from them.

Daunting though this assessment may be for potential leaders, some do measure up to it:

IJ: I feel X is very good... Very good. He's a one-off, I would say, and I've learned a lot from him...

S: And is that just his learning, do you think, or is it the sort of person he is, too?

IJ: I think it's the sort of person he is, too... I think he's made an impression... And he's very humble.

Charisma in a leader can count for a lot:

AN: P [housegroup leader]... had a much more intense attitude to study and prayer... And I think that frightened me in the beginning. Until I got to know her better. I think we were all a little bit scared, it was a little bit too much and too powerful, the way she led the group... But a wonderful person.

As this qualified approval indicates, fanaticism in group leadership is seen as a potential danger for study groups:

DB: [The group's] sometimes an attractive alternative to church. But... that's got its dangers... it can be completely independent and nothing to do with a church, and there's always a risk it can go slightly off the rails, go the wrong direction.

S: Theologically, you mean?

DB: Yeah, maybe. Where it may just be in the hands of a strong-minded leader. And... I don't think we've gone like that. We haven't had manipulative leaders at all.

As we have seen above, in Relating groups the ministerial or academic expert of Thinking study has frequently been replaced by group members taking turns to moderate the discussion:

- S: So do you find then that the group leader – the person in the group who's doing the leading – has a role? If you've got the book that's sort of setting it in motion –
- DW: That's right – they're just keeping things running smoothly, making sure that each question is answered... No, the leader is the timekeeper, moving along at the right pace, keeps the pace right... letting the discussion flow, and intervening every so often. We don't normally necessarily know more than anybody else there... It's just that somebody has to do this and a person volunteers to do it each week.

While in the absence of expert input Relaters may have turned to shared leadership out of necessity, it can build up both confidence and understanding in the members who take on this role:

- SG: I think it's important that everybody feels that... they can lead, if they want to... Because I think they feel that they're playing a full part in it... And I think it gives people confidence. DA had never had much experience, for example, of Bible studies, and she didn't want to lead to begin with for a long time, because it was a new thing to her... And then gradually she realised... that you didn't really have to know too much, so long as you were willing to ask the question then other people would keep the ball going. And I think it's made her feel more part of things, to be able to do that role as well... Otherwise, I think there's a tendency to sit back and sometimes just let other people do it all. And I think if you're doing it yourself, you actually learn more. And if you're reading up the leader's notes, the background notes, then... I think you get a lot out of that because you're having to be a bit more prepared than everybody else... So I think it's good from that point of view.

Moreover, Relating leadership is not taken casually; good preparation is stressed as a vital part of the role:

- AN: I think lay people can lead house groups... Because I've done it. You just have to prepare... There's a lot of preparation. It's not trivial, really, that's what I'm saying.

As might be expected, then, either unprepared or authoritarian leadership is as unpopular with Relaters as it is with Thinkers, though as much out of respect for the character of the people one will be leading in study as in acknowledgment of their intellectual capacity.

Relaters and community hermeneutics

As in Chapter 5, Relaters' characteristic choices of study theme, followed by their reactions to the four consecutive steps of experience, historical-critical close study, connection and appropriation, and an appraisal of Relating as a hermeneutical strategy, will be considered in turn.

Theme

Since personal relevance is in any case one of Relaters' chief criteria for study, picking a theme which resonates with personal experience is not, potentially, so difficult for them as for Thinkers. One participant in a largely Relating group established (see below) that the only study week in which she had felt less engaged was one where the theme chosen had less resonance with her own experience. This points up the crucial importance of choosing a theme relevant to all participants. It also illustrates the desire of Relaters not to cause conflict: because other group members felt strongly that this theme spoke to their condition, this participant accepted a thematic focus less appropriate for her particular circumstances.

More conservative Relaters tend to choose more overtly religious themes.

Unfortunately, however, this strategy has the potential of blocking the process of connecting experience and text (see below and discussion in Appendix I).

Experience

More liberal Relaters take kindly to the use of experience as a study tool:

- IJ: I like to start off from the experience... Then go and find the text. Because I think that's really more relevant to life today.

The sharing of personal matters took one study group consisting largely of Relaters (Group 3) to a deeper level of relationship:

- AN: I think the fact [that] we shared our feelings the way we did altered the feelings we shared: we had feelings of anger and loss and frustration...
- S: I think all that arose from Q being so open at the very beginning...
- AN: I know. Then it all came out. It was good. It was quite cathartic in a way, as well. Especially for me, being a new member, a fairly new member of the congregation, a very new member of the session [eldership].

These particular sessions took on an almost therapeutic aspect:

- DS: [S]ometimes I think it does people an awful lot of good to talk like that... To put into words what your experiences are, knowing it won't go any further. It's very, very confidential.

The participants in this group were all female, and some group members attached significance to this aspect of the dynamic:

- DT: I may have said at the beginning, I thought [the method] was very female. I think some men would be uncomfortable with it, but I don't know if that has come across in other groups. It could be that someone coming along to it, not knowing what my son knew [that personal experience would be solicited], would actually have been there, fit in and adjust and enjoy.

However, in spite of the large role played in this group by shared experience, other aspects of life still remained off-limits for this group, reminiscent of Thinkers' discomfort with emotional sharing:

- AN: And there are things like [finance] I would not like to have had talked about at that group.

Liberal Relaters also saw the way in which group discussion of experience set up an agenda for subsequent study as positive for less naturally Thinking types:

- AR: I think we probably wouldn't have arrived at the point we arrived at, had we started with the Bible reading first... I think sometimes when people see a Bible passage and they're asked to give their thoughts on it, their mind just goes a blank... And you're frightened to say something in case it's so stupid to other people... So leading in from the angle of where you want to go, you're really setting up answers you want to find, rather than looking at

something that you want to find the answers for... [I]f you sit down with a passage of the Bible and you say, What does that mean to you... you're having to state what it means to you. And sometimes you're not all that sure... But when you're looking for answers to things, you've thrown up all the questions, someone gives you a passage and says, This is all about the answers... That's much easier.

More conservative Relaters were not so sure to what extent everyday experience should be valorised: might too much authority given to it not tend to erode the distinctiveness of the Christian perspective?

TI: I find a number of the Churches Together courses unhelpful... I think they were trying to be too clever... they were based around the experience of the world without being grounded in a biblical, Christian, clear base... And I found them of the world rather than of God.

SG: I think sometimes if you talk just about an issue, you end up not bringing the Bible into it at all, and it's maybe just your own... ideas of morality. Or... just the kind of discussion you would have with anybody rather than with a Christian housegroup.

It is also possible from a more conservative perspective to use experience as a study tool, as this description of a study guide from the Willow Creek style of cultural evangelism (for more detail on Willow Creek see Donahue 2001) demonstrates:

DB: I think the [Bible study] that we were doing the most recently was quite good. I don't know if we left at the end with all the answers you might have been looking for, because it was a terribly difficult topic... about evil and suffering... They started off saying what someone might say, a bunch of people who have no knowledge of Christianity or Christian teaching, saying, This is just what it seems reasonable to think, from the world's point of view... And that's quite a good way to be challenged. Because... we're supposed to have a distinct point of view on issues, and if people say, This is what we think, we need to know: do we agree with that?... Or... is our view different in some way as based on the Bible? And so it wasn't just saying, This is what the Bible says, but This is what other people say – how do you feel about that? Do you agree with that, or do you feel that they've got it wrong in some way?... [G]radually it would bring us round to, Well, these things the Bible says, how are they different? How comfortable do you feel with this point of view, the biblical point of view as opposed to the man on the street's point of view?... They started off not being a biblical point of view: I couldn't possibly believe in a God who allows this and this to happen... Quite often, quite obviously not God-believing, not Christian... The challenge would be, Do you actually sympathise with what that person is

saying?... [I]t may be right. There may be points where Christian belief is not very different... you don't always know whether you're meant to agree or meant to disagree... So... it forced you to be honest and say, Well, this is what I think. Which led onto the question, Well, why do you think that? What's the basis of your thinking?

In this situation, however, the experience of the study guide's 'man in the street', as much as group members' own experience, sets the agenda. Moreover, until the text under study has been revealed, one cannot always understand the relevance of this external input:

SG: [T]he American guide we were using recently [from Willow Creek], it tended to start off with the theme and ask for your reactions about that: what are your feelings about death? Or if it's about fear, what are your fears? Starting very much with the everyday, where you're coming from... And then, sometimes there's a leap that you can't always see to begin with, you go into the text. And it's only as you sort of unpack the text that you can see where the initial question was coming from.

In practice, the more conservative Relaters judged the time given to experience within community hermeneutics to be excessive (IG). More liberal Relaters were more likely to take difficulties inherent in any elicitation of group experience into account:

HL: I would say that in general I think people obviously were able to talk about experiences, maybe, you know, a bit of sidetracking, and I know that's hard when you've only got an hour and a half for it not to happen. But there maybe would have been times when we could have been a bit more focussed.

Historical-critical close study

AN: [M]y general Bible reading is to find out, to really try and understand Jesus. How he was trying with these ordinary people he took as his disciples. And he was trying to instil in them what the truth and the real life should be, and how you should live it.

From a Relater's point of view, the purpose of Bible study is not, as for a Thinker, to find out information for the sake of knowing more; rather, it is to inform the ethos of our personal lives, which should be based on that of Jesus. From the more

conservative viewpoint, this study purpose is achieved by a synthesis of the available historical sources:

DW: We once did [comparing Gospel parallels] as a Bible study. It was to do with the parable of the Lost Sheep... I don't know if it occurs in all four Gospels... I'm sure that we were comparing more than two... But I remember that one of them had a much poorer account than the other one... It just shows that the Gospels, when you're reading one, it doesn't necessarily mean that you know everything to be known.

From this perspective, an account with less detail is indeed a poorer account, since while each account speaks of the same event, some tell you more about it than others. The significance of having multiple stories resides in the historical confirmation one Gospel source gives another:

DA: Comparing the same stories in more than one Gospel... [O]bviously that's one of the things that makes us say, It must be true, you know: lots of people are telling the same story... I think it would be like reading the same newspaper story in several different newspapers.

This viewpoint renders historical-critical study, where the aim is to distinguish different versions of one story in order to discern the historical background of different authors and communities behind them, at best unappealing and at worst actively unhelpful:

IG: I don't think personally that would be what would appeal to me a lot, the relevant background stuff... I suppose some people would enjoy that more... I feel that it isn't really what we've come for. ... I'm looking for guidance more, challenging, to make me think and to make me think about... faith.

One aspect of such study – intertextual links between the Gospel studied and the Hebrew Bible – was, however, highlighted in feedback as useful, feeding the Relating desire to connect in a way which did not counteract the conservative Relating dynamic described below.

For more liberal Relaters, as for their Thinking counterparts, knowledge of the historical background nuances our understanding of the stories about Jesus which are their main concern:

- S: [W]hen you're reading the Gospels in particular, do you focus on the history aspect of them or the story aspect of them?
- AT: Probably the story aspect... But because of the story you tend to bring the history into it... [O]bviously somebody coming up to you and saying, you know, that they're unclean, you have to put the history into that... I mean, that's a very basic simplistic view. But I think I look very much at the stories, but... the history does come into it.

Increased knowledge of the background to Gospel events offers them an almost empathetic grasp of how it was to live then:

- DS: [I]t so happened that we were doing... a similar subject at school last term [D is a classroom assistant]... it must have been an awful, very hard time for Jesus to live in, that kind of land, and the time that he did. I mean, there couldn't have been very many good things going on... their life would be hard, just living from day to day. Just living and feeding yourself couldn't have been easy at all.
- EP: I think it might reveal more to me... if I can understand more about how it was written and why... A long, long time ago I went to Rome, and we went down the catacombs. And I was quite impressed when I was there about people going down into these catacombs because... they didn't want to be seen and you know... to worship in secret and also they buried people... And then I thought, 'I would have hated to have done that,' and then I realised, 'No,' because it was very hot outside, I could hardly breathe. It was really welcome to go down these cool catacombs... And I thought... '[I]t's just what they would say. They probably went downstairs because it was cool!' And I think... when you look at this you think, 'Hang on, that's why they thought that'... I could then see why things were written in certain ways. And that brought back that little experience to me. And helped my understanding of it.

This ties up with an unexpected finding: those group members, from very different social and theological contexts, who had been on pilgrimage to the Holy Land all found that experience both moving and helpful for their interpretation of the relevant biblical stories:

AT: [W]e had all been to Israel, on the Israel trip... We then had [a Bible study group] the following Easter, which looked at... going through all the places where he visited... You know, the stories behind them again... And I found that, probably because I had seen the visual aspect... As well as the actual written – you know, just hearing about it – I found that very, very helpful.

Significantly, though, stories of pilgrimage to Oberammergau produced very similar responses, indicating that the empathetic connection Relaters draw between experience and the Gospel stories does not necessarily rely on historical accuracy.

One participant recounted ruefully her first encounter with this difficulty:

AT: The only time I got caught out with that [was] when I was about seven in Sunday School, and we had to draw a picture of Jesus sailing on the Sea of Galilee... And at the time we had been a day sailing every weekend... We had a JP14, and I presented my parents with this picture of Jesus in a JP14 hanging out... and his robes flowing... And of course my parents laughed, and I was so upset.

Purely imaginative engagement with the biblical texts can be a powerful interpretative tool – witness the revival of interest in Ignatian meditation. Such engagement, though part of the Bible study experience of my fieldwork subjects, is beyond the limits of community hermeneutics and therefore of this study. The use of the historical imagination to engage with the authors and communities behind the biblical texts, however, can be significant pastorally as well as educationally:

GT: Lots of people hang back in churches because they don't feel good enough, they don't think they know enough... About the church and about faith... Sometimes what Bible study does is let people see that people who wrote the texts were not superhuman after all, they were just ordinary people like them... So it gives them a better degree of confidence.

It is their ability to form connections between the current church community and its predecessors behind the texts which enables liberal Relaters so successfully to engage in the third stage of community hermeneutics.

Connection

Compared with Thinkers' dubious reactions to the idea of connecting our experience with close study of the texts, this response from a liberal Relater rings with enthusiasm:

AR: I think the connecting worked well. They probably never got all the answers in their lifetime, and we probably will not in ours. But no, I think the connecting was good. I think we all grasped that totally.

Individual Relaters might find such connection more or less easy to make during any specific session, depending on how deeply their own experience had been engaged, as this interviewee established on reflection:

AT: There was one week that I didn't make the connection... I don't know why I didn't, because I think I related to most, I think I related to all in some way... I thought, maybe I've just been on such a high on the other two that this is how I'm really going to find it. [But] it came back the next week... It may just have been how I was feeling that particular night... That you're not concentrating so clearly, just as simple as that. But I got back onto the bandwagon...

S: [T]he week I had difficulty finding the passage [for the group to study] was this balancing between generations we did.

AT: That's it... Now the reason I wondered if... I had a problem, actually, with that, is simply because we've never in our family had a problem balancing generations.

Where a whole group is working well in Relating mode, the dynamic of connection can become exponential. If sharing of experience and close study have satisfactorily taken place, ideas previously unconsidered by either leader or participants may be generated. This extended description of the dynamic in one of the groups studied, largely composed of Relaters (Group 3), conveys a little of the excitement in that process:

AN: And I think it was because of our interaction... and... the way you chose the passages and the way you directed us. Because I think you managed to bring out certain things, somebody would say something and it would trigger something in your understanding, and you would ask another question, and

you would lead us on... So it was like an unrolling of the understanding... And to me it was just like this being revealed... From our interaction with one another and with you... And that was why it was... such a positive Bible study.

S: It was buried in the group. I mean, I wasn't giving you the answer, just asking questions.

AN: No, you weren't... But you were taking bits out of what we were saying, and something was becoming clear to you. Did you not feel that? Because occasionally, I got the impression that suddenly you had thought, 'Ah!'... And you went on to ask us something else... So it seemed to me that it was a kind of interaction between us.

S: Yes. Yes, it wasn't a question of, I know the answers, I hope they're going to get there. I came to each session thinking, I wonder what we're going to discover.

AN: That's it. That's... the way we came to it, I'm sure. I certainly came with the question that we had to think about for the week, and wondering how it was all going to come out. Because we weren't talking to each other through the week, obviously... And we all came out with similar things and different things... And there were certainly things revealed to you, because I remember... then you said, 'Ah, but – ' and then you'd ask another question. So I think it was very much the six or seven of us... We worked very well as a group... Including you, I mean, you know. It wasn't just you and us. It was us all together.

A typical connection made is the following, indicating both the use of story in focussing on the text itself, and also the historical background of the Gospel communities, discerned through close reading:

AT: And I think too what it's hard to grasp, maybe because nowadays people move around much more and are much more multicultural societies, and racism is considered such a dreadful thing nowadays... And you see them highlighted in these, when he's going from one area to another, how very different the people could be... Their attitude to [Jesus] and their own... habits... And I think that's very interesting because in actual fact things haven't really changed, because we still very much stick to our own cultural background... But we don't think we do!

Such an interpretative strategy is not so different from the universalism of Thinkers.

The difference in perceived success between the two may arise from the greater depth of experience and trust that liberal Relaters felt able to share, as well as their greater drive to make connections.

Less enthusiasm was evinced by the more conservative Relaters. Here, other aspects of the Thinking reaction to connection of life and texts were echoed. The amount of material to be connected was overwhelming. Had there been less of a focus on experience, there would have been less material, though everyone's contribution had been worth recording. Some parallels were discovered each time, but equally some experiences had no parallel.

It seems that, like Thinkers, these Relaters felt less incentive than the more liberal variety to connect texts and experience through community hermeneutics. If so, it cannot be for the Thinking reason that the new ideas gained by close study are sufficient reward, and that therefore the hermeneutical process may be short-circuited at that point. Rather, the obstacle may arise at an earlier point: the elicitation of experience. If one's experience is necessarily subordinate to one's knowledge of the texts – while the biblical text has authority *ipso facto*, God is not necessarily to be found through the external world of experience – a process inviting experience to precede and inform textual interpretation works against the group's internal logic. Thus for the conservative Relaters observed, the whole dynamic of my fieldwork militated against their preferred mode of textual appropriation. However, overt protest would not fit their avoidance of conflict. No wonder the group observed was politely unenthusiastic about community hermeneutics.

Appropriation

What, then, is the proper goal of Relaters' study of the Bible, whether more conservative or more liberal? It is the completion of the hermeneutical circle in daily life: application.

SG: I think once you have kind of read the passage, and taken it at face value, then I think you ought to go below that and say, Well, what is God saying to me just now through that passage?

For conservative Relaters, as we have just seen, the proper order of interpretation is to study the Bible and to change one's life in consonance with its doctrinal imperatives. This is taken for granted to such an extent that a question asking about the reverse order of influence can be automatically reinterpreted:

S: Would you say that your experience, the things that have happened to you in life, affect the way that you study the Bible? Make you understand the texts in a particular way?

DW: Yeah. It might be a bit hard, but I'll have a try... I suppose that bit about loving your neighbour. It's not always easy to do that, particularly when the neighbour is quite obnoxious... But if you do make an effort, it's surprising how things can change.

For more liberal Relaters, however, one's personal experience may take conscious precedence over the historical accuracy of textual interpretation:

VT: I have to admit that I'm doing this personally; it sometimes means that I take a message from, say, a phrase, which is not in fact the meaning of the phrase in its context.

DT: I think Bible study is personal. And if you find comfort in what you think, it may be wrong, it may be not what the person in the Gospel, whoever it was, meant, but he was living in a different culture, in a different time, which had different meanings.

Both varieties of Relater agree on one point: the changes sought as a result of Bible study are internal rather than external, slow rather than dramatic, a matter of character rather than action as such. Description of their effect can be quite inchoate:

VT: I think this... isn't something which maybe happens immediately. It's something which sets off a... train of thought, that continues. And it's almost as though it is a spiritual influence... Rather than an intellectual one, if I can put it that way. That it's something that makes me... feel better... really not so much in words, or not even in behaviour, but in... inner spiritual change.

Such a phenomenon can also, of course, also be described in more down-to-earth terms:

AT: I probably just came home in a better mood than I went out!

However, some specifics can be enumerated. From a Relating perspective, new or improved relationships within the group are a significant result of study:

NG: If we take the relationships at the Agape meal as a kind of way of measuring... not a scientific measure, at the Agape meal we felt that we had a group identity, because we sat close to each other and we talked to each other. And that certainly wouldn't have happened before the group, because either we wouldn't have known these people or not known them well enough to do that.

HL: I suppose... people being able to talk about their experiences and how they feel has given an insight into some people... that I maybe relate to them in a different way. Say... somebody who I find quite frustrating – I'm sure loads of people find me frustrating – and maybe have been a bit dismissive of because of that. Talking about experiences and their views on faith has given me an insight to think, Well, I have to be a lot more considerate, because in fact I can now understand, even if I don't agree, why someone is expressing things in that way... So I think... 'I've changed my actions because of the Bible study with Sarah, OK, now I need to look at something current and change the way I relate to it' – I'm not conscious of having done that. But certainly... the experience of sharing experiences with people... perhaps made me change the way I either relate to people or interpret what they're saying.

Such study is also a means of affirming and strengthening one's own approach to Christianity:

AR: I think [the study] just sort of cemented, you know – what's the other word I'm looking for?... Confirmed. I think it confirmed that, for each of us personally, that this was what we were all about.

For conservative Relaters, keeping one's standards uncontaminated by those of the world, by means of mutual influence within the group, is particularly important:

IG: I think sometimes because you mix also with friends who are not Christians, or with families or people who might be Christians, but have different standards to yours. Because people in a very insidious way have an influence on you, that you don't really discern, necessarily... But you can have conversations which can influence your thinking, and influence your standards, so I think in the prayer group you're pulled back to the right way of thinking.

For the conservative Relaters observed, specific character changes were also hoped for as a result of Bible study – becoming slower to anger, for instance, or more patient with others:

DW: Sometimes a person can get quite annoyed about certain things... [It] can get to the extent where it's almost like a sin to be so annoyed, in that sense... You know, you can get very annoyed because people are doing certain things. Whereas, you know, these things are wrong but... well, maybe I shouldn't be reacting like that, so extremely.

DA: [V]ery simplistically, I suppose, just in day-to-day life where my tendency at work for example might be to... rush, rush, rush and try and get my work done and, you know, be quite single-minded about that... Just to... take others into consideration, for example – a very general sort of thing, but just to think, stop and think. I do that a lot more, stopping and thinking, since I've been reading the Bible. Before I start to do something... And just to say, how would I want others to react in this situation? How would I feel if I were on the receiving end of what I'm about to do or say?... I think... it makes me much more reflective about... how I interact with other people.

For liberal Relaters, on the other hand, the 'coping by reframing' universalising mechanism for dealing with intractable problems, first evidenced in Thinking, is found again here, reformulated in terms of relationships:

AT: Yes, I think [the process] lets you see...when you've seen it, done all that and gone through the process, it makes you realise that your problem isn't nearly as big as you think it is... It helps to put it into proportion that people have always been suffering the same traumas that you're going through, just in a different way, and although it's horrendous for you, these other people have survived, so therefore you'll survive.

As with Thinkers, the idea of immediate and specific action is treated with caution, whether from a ministerial perspective, not wanting to manufacture artificial reactions:

TC: I think what happens is a process like French polishing, where you have a surface and you work and...gradually the shine and the lustre builds up. And I think it's a very, very gradual process of change, of input... I think occasionally, particularly with younger people, you might get a sudden breakthrough, a sudden clarity or a changing of mind. Or something may particularly move people, they will find something that speaks to them very,

very potently, and they will do something selfless or, you know, something may result because of it, but generally speaking there's been some sort of prior input as well... I don't think a one-off hit of any sort of Bible study or sermon is likely in itself – I've seen too much of 'preaching to decision' over the years, an awful lot of that... Billy Graham, I suppose, would crystallise that. Someone who preaches to get people to react in a given way...

I wouldn't envisage a change of that sort. But the type of change that I'm aiming at is unlikely to happen in a one-session setting.... [A]ny sort of major life change is almost certainly going to have... a large number of previous encounters, previous inputs, previous false starts.

or from group members who see the whole combination of factors involved in the process of textual appropriation as far too complex to be susceptible of analysis:

DW: [E]very bit [of study is] of some relevance, I think, could influence you in some way. It might not be obvious what the influence is, but it will give you slightly more character. It might not be obvious right away, it might be a few years down the line... When you suddenly remember something in the situation... [t]hat you had discussed.

NG: I can think of all sorts of factors which are so difficult to separate from each other, such as the previous interactions of the people you've got in the group who may, unbeknown to you, have been wondering whether they should start their soup run... Or the kind of... both approving and hostile reactions which may... arise in the group because again of the interaction, a person's views interacting with people, the interaction of people with the text and so on. And all of these are extraordinarily difficult to separate out from each other.

Over the years the conservative long-term study group observed has initiated action:

SG: [W]hen the missionary partners came back from Thailand, a couple of years ago they were home for about a year and a half, they settled in a furlough house nearby... And they were coming to F and I just happened to say to them at one stage, would you like to come to a house group? And they said yes, they would love the support of that. So that was... very much a two-way thing. Because we learned so much from them about Christianity in action... where the rubber hits the road in Thailand... And all the practical schemes that they were thinking up. And how much prayer was needed, and how much money was needed. And I think that gave us a kind of practical outlet as well...

[W]e've arranged for the housegroup to go gardening, and it's always very worthwhile doing something different... so we did the Manse garden one time. And another time we decided to have housegroup up [the hill], just go[ing] up the hill and sitting on a quiet bit and pray[ing] for the city.

Welcome to strangers, support for the church's mission elsewhere, practical help offered, intercession made: these actions of worship and service flowing out of the life of a Relating study group affect the lives of others beyond the group itself. However, the actions of a Relating group are largely concerned with relationships within the church, as opposed to partnering God's action in the wider world.

Appraisal

One of the interesting aspects of setting up a variety of Bible study groups has been coming across adults with limited or no experience of Bible study and hearing their reactions to the process. One of these comments sums up both the strengths and the weaknesses of a group functioning in Relater mode:

AW: I would say... we had a look at ourselves. We were inwardly looking... at ourselves, but never really expanded it out into the community. We kept coming back into ourselves.

For a church group wanting to connect the Bible with their own lives, 'looking at ourselves' is a necessary focus; but, I would argue, not a sufficient one. Taken to its logical conclusion, one ends up with the following claustrophobic position:

DS: Things don't change all that much... We would love them to change. We would love to be... the person who would say something totally new and inspiring that nobody else has said, and they'd say, Oh, that's great, we'll do it this way. But life doesn't go like that. I just feel that everybody just does the same thing in the end...

S: Even Jesus?

DS: I think so... I don't think Jesus would have any other beliefs and ways of doing things than what we do nowadays.

If even Jesus is co-opted into the group's convenient beliefs and attitudes, however laudable, a group of Relaters is in danger of turning in on itself. This, of course, is a caricature of what happens in actual groups, where the question of the group's relation to the wider community beyond the church cannot be stifled altogether.

One possible reaction is a guilty feeling at the back of the mind that concrete action is an unrealised ideal:

SG: I think... I've felt for a long time that housegroup can be too much inward looking. And yes, supporting the people that are within the group, or the people who've moved on from the group, but very much within the confines of the people that you rub shoulders with in the group... Occasionally, I think, depending on what we've been looking at, it may have resulted in writing a letter... But very rarely has it resulted I think in action. We've been aware of this, of this lack, though, and I think we do try occasionally to right it. But then you always sort of lapse back, because it's easier to talk rather than arrange to... meet up and do something else, another evening or another time.

Another strategy involves dividing approaches to study into the active and the spiritual, and choosing to specialise in the latter:

DB: There's... some groups we know who are much better at doing some joint action on a particular activity outside the group, outside the walls... And that has not been our strength, usually. The group says, We will do some particular social activity... I think our action has been more spiritual... in the sense of... spiritually supporting each other, and being there to help each other... But still doing things within the group, being a... kind of pastoral support to each other... And I could, you could easily work yourself up into being guilty about what someone does and what you don't... But on the other hand, everyone has their gifts. And you've one kind of gift, and you use it well, and someone else has a different kind, and you let them get on with it... You don't... bother comparing who's got a more worthy gift.

This reaction does not, however, solve the larger problem which may be encountered by an overly homogeneous group of Relaters, that experience and study may both become subordinate to the group's system of values, whether conservative or liberal, through a polite refusal to engage with other perspectives. The result is a stable but somewhat claustrophobic gathering:

DW: [I]f it's just a few people each week and it's the same people each week, you can get to the point where you... almost feel you've heard it all before... And it has been a bit like that, I suppose, in the last year or so. We have been down to four or five... I mean, I think a small number's fine for a little while. But I think to go on and on like that for year after year...

This is not an inevitable result of the Relating mode of interpretation – after all, without putting energy into intra-group relationships, the group would not have stayed together long enough to exist at all. However, avoidance of such frozen group dynamics may require the deliberate attitude, evinced by the comment below, of welcoming diversity in believing:

AR: [I]t's easy to get a lot out of a Bible study if you feel at one with the group of people you're studying with...

S: If you've got the same opinions as them?

AR: Not so much the same opinions –

S: Or that you feel comfortable with them as people?

AR: Yeah. And if you have a degree of respect for them... as people.

To such an attitude, characterised by the Changing mode of interpretation, we now turn.

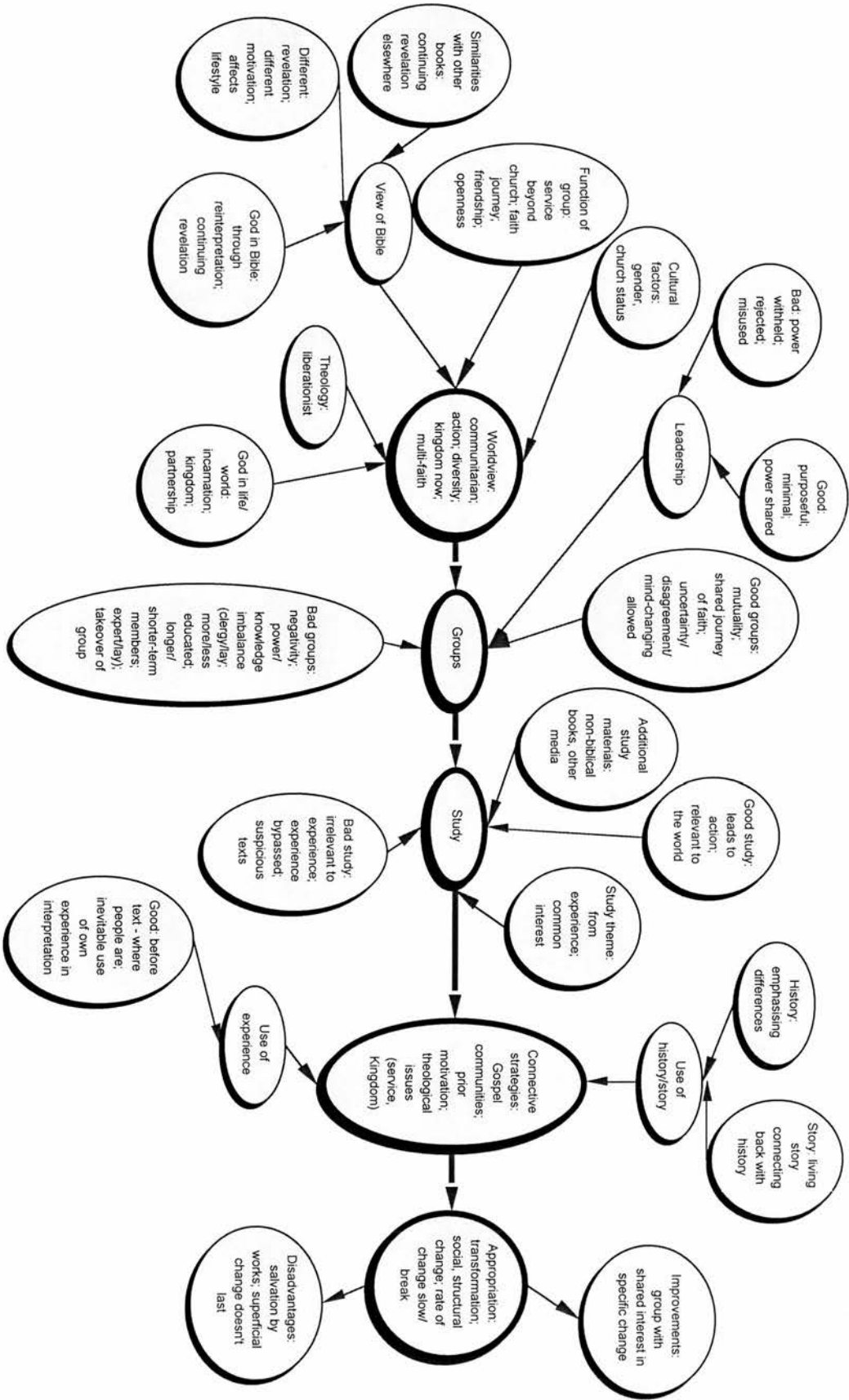


FIG. 8: CHANGER

7. The Changer: Bible study for action

EP: *In the study groups I'd done before... they might have said, OK, what does this mean in terms of action? and we would have agreed some particular action... That's [organising a lunch club for lonely people] some action that, you know, I continue to do.*

S: *And that came out of the Bible study?*

EP: *Yes, sort of, it started from that, yeah. I mean, I had the thought in my mind. So maybe I am also more of an action person than an intellectual...*

Life beyond study

The hypothetical study group described has developed a life of its own beyond the boundaries of its original focus on Bible study. Superficially, its dynamic is not easy to distinguish from that of a Relating group. People still meet in each other's homes, enquire after each other's lives. But unanswerable questions have been raised within the group; theological comfort zones have been challenged and redrawn. As a result, there is an increased interest in and emphasis on the world of experience beyond the group itself. People may be commissioned to go away and find out about some aspect of political or social action, come back and report on the options: Do we want to get involved in this? If so, what is our consensus on the best method?

Yet diversity as much as consensus is a mark of Changing groups, as the quiddities of individual members are known and allowances made for them. This requires a high degree of trust. Instead of group members conforming to one theological norm, opinions are allowed to vary. Instead of a specified attitude to the biblical texts being a filter for the group's view of life in general, their interwoven lives are themselves a text on which the biblical texts are but one commentary among many. Books, films, discussion, action and social life are all part of this fabric:

TH: I think the Bible study – the study of the Bible – [i]s a relatively small part of our group... It's more a forum for exploring ideas, nearly always of a theological nature, but ideas very much rooted in life and experience... And the Bible is a part of that; it's a kind of foundational part, but by no means the main part in practice.

This description comes from the liberal/radical long-term Changing group I observed (Group 6). Its origins are in the same church as the more conservative long-term Relating group considered above (see Chapter 6). Greatly to my surprise I learned, after having established contact with both groups, that twenty years earlier they had begun as one, conservative group within a largely liberal congregation. After dividing into two to accommodate increasing numbers, one group has retained their initial orientation, while over the years the other has changed theological and operational course considerably. While groups of conservative Changers may also exist (see Chapter 9 below), I observed none such in my fieldwork.

Paradoxically, a group made up exclusively of Changers is not the goal of this Changing group. Variety includes embracing and learning from the approaches of Thinking and Relating members. Indeed, without the analytical input of Thinkers and the mutual attitude of trust fostered by Relaters, such a group would have neither material upon which to exercise its questioning, nor the means by which to render such questioning safe and hence possible. A corollary of this is that it is not always possible to isolate specific attitudes to life or the biblical texts which everyone in a Changing group would own. However, for every Changer the readiness to question and if necessary alter some attitude, situation or societal structure is necessary in order to feel study is worthwhile:

S: You're the sort of person who wants to follow [Bible study] up... It looks as if you're not too bothered by change.

EP: No, not at all, no. I mean, I... believe that things continue to grow...
I think it's about personal growth, really.

Isolated Changers within either largely Thinking or largely Relating groups may find their desire for growth and transformation thwarted:

WO: People tend to be better in my opinion doing things if there's a group of you doing it... Rather than one person going in and trying to make a change, because either people won't listen if there's only one person, [or] they'll go, Oh, you know, don't listen to her, she's always full of ideas and never follows them through herself.

For this reason I shall be considering Changing – like Relating – as an interpretative mode functioning as much on a group as on an individual level. What, then, does a Changing group look for in Bible study? The possibility of transformation: of study making a difference to the world beyond the group.

Worldview

Demographic generalisations are harder than ever to make with a group whose hallmark is diversity. Going by my interviewees, those who are ordained are more likely to show aspects of Changing than lay people. Since several ministers were interviewed because of their readiness to have a student trying out new methods of Bible study on their congregation, this finding is somewhat self-generating; however, a group of URC ordinands observed (Group 9) also brought a largely Changing approach to community hermeneutics. This may be correlated with the tendency of Changers, noted below, to have altered theological perspective: theological training should foster reappraisal of one's own position and a greater understanding of the views of others.

Again, it may be significant that the majority of group participants who use Changing as their preferred mode of interpretation are women, who may have experienced inequality within society at large and thus be motivated to look for change. However, it is equally possible for people approaching Bible study from a position of privilege to be sensitised by their own perceived prosperity into wanting to change things for others:

- S: [D]o you look at the world as it is now, and ask yourself, What's God doing here? Where's God in this?
- EB: Very often. Very often.
- S: On a world scale, or on a personal level?
- EB: Not so much on a personal level, because I'm just so lucky. I mean, it's just... my family are well, my husband is well, you know, I have everything I want and more than I need... no, it's just there's so much suffering in the rest of the world.

A group of Changers sees sharing a diversity of views as one of its major functions:

- SN: I think within the context of the housegroup... quite a big part of the goal is about the understanding and the sharing of perspectives.

Though initially the long-term Changing group observed was based in one congregation, current members play some part in at least five, several of which are of different denominations from the original mother church. Rather than being seen as an obstacle to group relationships, however, this is part of the variety embraced:

- TH: I think one important thing is that we're not all from the same church tradition... Either from way back or even currently.
- S: So what traditions are represented?
- TH: WR, for example, is an Episcopalian... And the rest of us are mostly Church of Scotland... And we have many different backgrounds... I think that's quite important. Although, I guess, if people were all from the same background, there'd be other diversities.

Paradoxically, Changers' exploration of variety within their ranks results in an added appreciation of the commonalities between group members:

- SN: [I]t's a theme that's kind of run through a lot of stuff that I've been involved in... that there are more similarities between us as human beings than there are differences... And that that is not only something to recognise, but it is actually something that can actively... become part of different ways of communicating in the world; ways which are more productive and more peaceful and less confrontational than the ways that we often go about it.
- S: That 'the other' isn't necessarily something to fear?
- SN: No. Absolutely... And... that part of the reason... that we fear the stranger is because we fear the stranger in ourselves. And if we can encounter the stranger in ourselves within a fairly safe setting, you know... it might take away some of the fear and open up other more positive ways of communicating.

Such an approach also has political implications:

- EB: [F]unnily enough the last group that I was in, the one before this one, was again a great mixture... I remember one of the people in the group saying to me... that she wasn't enjoying this group too much because it was so political.
- S: Aha. And by that she meant?
- EB: Well, I think she meant, I think a lot of us, one was a doctor, a lot of us were in a caring profession... And our views were pretty radical, if you know what I mean.
- S: In the sort of left-wing political way?
- EB: Yes. Yes, yes.

As with Relaters, the building up of relationships ensuing from this acceptance of diversity enables a Changing group to operate as a mini-church for its members:

- WR: I find this group much more important to me than any church services or church study or anything of that type. In fact more and more of my thinking and the way things are developing through the group, I'm beginning to see churches as irrelevant... I... wonder what it's all about, all the kind of liturgy and so on that goes on in churches, which seems to have very little relevance to anything in the real world... So really... my spiritual development and my spiritual expression, I think, often, relates to the group rather than to the church... And... if I was to stop going to church merely because I saw the whole thing as irrelevant, it wouldn't have any great effect on my faith journey, as it were. Whereas if I were to stop going to this group, it would have a major effect.

For a Changing group, then, church activity must measure up against their experience of 'the real world': the reverse of the dynamic used by conservative Relaters. And against liberal Relaters' acceptance of the status quo, Changers

consider that if the church as institution does not measure up to their expectations, other ways of being church are also thinkable:

WR: [T]hey as a group... are very dissatisfied with the church and its lack of contact with the local community. And... one of the things we looked at some time ago was a report, I think it was a Church of Scotland report, I don't know, *Church without Walls*, I think?... We all felt that this was how the church should be thinking about the future and... looking to God and be[ing] relevant to society. And one of them, one aspect of that would be lots of small groups like we are... Why do you have to support these... huge buildings at great expense?

However, since members of the group have varying levels of association with church institutions beyond the group itself, some would find this a hard road to follow:

S: [D]o you think [the group] would carry on being [a church for its members] if it... severed links with its original congregation?

AS: Not for me... I need the other side as well. I need... the more formal, the more structured, the more worshipful, the more didactic, perhaps. I don't mean that I sit at the feet of my minister and lap up every word he says, because I don't. But I feel that that's a different kind of leadership, and a different kind of stretching of my mind...

S: If you had to choose between them at all?

AS: I don't know!... I suppose... I would choose the traditional one. Because you can always think on your own. But I'm not sure that's true.

This tension between different evaluations of the institutional church is characteristic of the group's heterogeneity, which is also displayed in the theological arena:

EB: [L]ast time we were discussing the miracles... And they can be quite difficult. And there are differences of opinion in people... half of us believed in miracles and half of us didn't... And so we had quite lively discussions as to what actually happened, and if... the disciples had really fed the five thousand people... [T]hat is the really nice part of it... Some really believe very deeply and others are more sceptical.

Yet evidently this *modus operandi* is not itself a source of tension for group members:

AS: [W]e are all completely free to disagree with each other. And people frequently do.

S: And what happens when you do?

AS: Well, we don't fall apart... I mean, we're not savage with each other... We're all mature enough adults to be able to have a discussion which is based on a difference of opinion, and end up with that difference of opinion continuing.

Unlike Thinkers, Changers are looking for some kind of answers revealed through study. However, unlike Relaters, they accept that as greater diversity is welcomed within the group, their questions are also liable to multiply:

TH: I think because we were genuinely seeking, we were looking for answers, but we accepted that we would probably find more questions.

Particular facets of personal experience may influence Changers' interpretative strategy, giving rise to some of this variety in insight:

S: Would you say that... the way you've lived your life makes a difference to the way you read the biblical text?... [W]ould becoming a father, for instance, make any difference to the way you understand particular stories?

TH: It probably would... God is likened to a father... And yet there's things, like he's supposed to have encouraged Abraham to sacrifice his son... And then there's all that stuff about sacrificing Jesus... And... I think my experience of being a father – which is something that's always been very important to me; it's something that, you know, even when I was quite young, I wanted to be – that makes me question very much the whole of the atonement... It doesn't make sense in terms of using the metaphor of 'father'... So, yes... that's one area where my experience does affect the way I think about God, think about the Bible.

However, not all Changers by any means use a reader-response approach:

S: [D]o you think you read the Bible differently because you're a mother, or a woman? Hard to tell the latter, because you've never not been female! But...

ST: No, I don't think so. I liked having our two children, but I don't think of myself as A Mother, like an archetype. When I was pregnant with my second child, and another pregnant friend said to me, 'Isn't it wonderful being pregnant around Christmas?' I didn't think so. And we've looked at a lot of Iona material about Mary around Christmas, and it doesn't mean anything in particular to me.

Their flexibility of approach is often associated with a change in theological perspective over the years:

WR: I have difficulty with belief. I have difficulty in launching myself really fully into belief, and I have tried over the years... I was really trying an

intellectual, analytical approach to it, and I quite quickly came to the view that this actually was pretty useless, that it didn't get you anywhere... I could do it, I could do it fine... but it isn't going to give you any answers. And it certainly isn't going to give you any positive answers, which are really what I was looking for. And so I thought... another approach might be to join in with a group of people who [it] seemed to me, at that point anyway, had very secure beliefs, and simply go along with that. And... simply by accepting their way of thought and their belief and so on, [one] might develop the habit oneself. And then, I suppose in a way develop my own spiritual depth, and then come to a greater security of belief through that.

This willingness to consider and be influenced by other points of view is mirrored by group members' changing view of the Bible:

TH: [W]hen I was very young I was brought up with the idea that the Bible was inspired, and totally authoritative, and I... read it in a very literalist kind of way... And gradually I think I've come to see it in a slightly different light, in... the breadth of it all. Events and people and ideas and what they perceived as their encounters with God... and I knew it was something that has a lot of helpful, interesting stuff in it, but not to be adhered to slavishly. And I also attribute inspiration and challenge to other sources and I treat them as just as authoritative.

Thus Changers can sit light to their own tradition, acknowledging other and contemporary sources of revelation. However, the Bible is still accorded unique significance by at least some members of the group:

ST: I suppose the way I was I would say that the Bible is completely different [from other books]. Now I'm not so sure. The Bible has a lot of themes that are relevant to exploration of life and spirituality, but other books have those themes too. I'd still put the Bible on a slightly different level.

AS: If [the resurrection] is just a story, then how is it different from... the Ramasita, or various other stories?

Others perceive the difference between the Bible and other books to lie in terms of motivation to action:

EB: I think that if the Bible has got any meaning, certainly the Gospels, then you should think a bit further... Well... the kingdom of heaven, or... the kingdom of God... And the meaning of that, and how... those words could be made possible for... other people. You know, I can't believe that it's just an airy-fairy... pie in the sky when you die. I feel that most of what

[Jesus] says must be worked out in this world... Otherwise it's just something you read, just like any other book.

Such a paralleling of biblical revelation and current experience will be enlarged on below. Here it suffices to note that it is a mechanism whereby Changers, like Relaters, can see God at work in this world. Changers, however, as typified by this minister, see their part in God's work as active rather than passive:

- S: [W]ould you on a local, individual scale ask questions like, What's God doing here? Where's God in this? Or would that be too naïve a theological question?
TT: Whether or not it's naïve, it's certainly a question that is often asked.
S: By you?
TT: Daily by me: What on earth does God want me to do now? You know: What is the appropriate divine response to this particular situation?

As with Relating, Changers' part in God's work may be closely connected to questions of character and ethics, as this Changing member of another group testifies:

- S: [Y]ou're asking questions like, How do I love? Where is God? And you're looking at your life, and you're looking at the texts to make sense of these big questions?
IJ: Yes. I think you are. Not all the time every day – perhaps I should be! – but I think, Do I just run to God in terms of emergency? And I think, I hope I don't. I hope, I would like to feel that I would put some input into people's lives, make them happy... Rather than necessarily being [someone] for whom there is just doom and gloom around.
S: So you're looking to be doing God's work in the world, to be making things a bit better?
IJ: Yes... I think you must. Yes. You want to make everybody's life as, as – well, people who come into contact with you – as good as possible, don't you?

For Changers, making people's lives 'as good as possible' is to be understood as active engagement with the causes as well as the symptoms of their unhappiness. Specific action may be easier to envisage in a local context than in the national or international arena, as another Changer explains:

- S: [D]o you look for God's activity in your everyday experience?
AR: I really do. I just don't expect him not to be there.
S: What about in bigger, world events? Do you look for patterns of God's activity in, say, what's happening in the headlines?
AR: I don't think I do... SW keeps saying to me things like... You just let anything happen. And my answer to him is that I'm proactive in small ways... And... only when the small ways are right do I think the big ways can be fixed... That's my thinking. You know, they speak of the Queen as a woman of great faith and the Prime Minister as a man of great faith and so on. And I'm not saying that they're not and I'm not saying I don't respect either of them, but I think, What are you doing about it? I feel if you have a faith, you should be doing something. I would think the Queen could sell all her jewels and build flats for all the homeless people... which would never happen... And... there's a bit of me thinks, really... that none of the big picture can be dealt with until the churches begin to grow and people develop a faith... [O]ccasionally I have said, Well, I can see... what I've done and I can see the results of what I've done...
S: The [community] café [set up by the church] down the road?
AR: Yeah. And different other things that we've done... I think, well, because of faith we set out to try that and we achieved it, whereas – and maybe that's a sort of self-centred way of approaching it: I just want to know that it works! – Whereas if you're out there in a great big thing –
S: Then it's a lot harder to tell whether it's worked, or whether it's helping?
AR: That's right. Whether you've made a difference or whether you haven't. I always like to know I've made a difference, or like to think I've made a difference.

Making a difference on a local and personal level is easier to gauge, as well as being less intractable theoretically:

- AS: [Discerning God's presence on the personal level] is easier to deal with, really.
S: Why is it easier?
AS: If you say: Where is God in this? And then you say: In me.

It is characteristic of the Changing interpretative approach that asking where God is at work in the world should end up in a discussion of human action. It is important, however, to note that such action is seen as a group as well as an individual response to God's presence in a situation:

- TT: I want to be just a little hesitant in claiming that or in suggesting that when... leading a Bible study... that kind of group, my only task was to help bring people to the point of asking Where is God in this for me?... [W]e may for

example discuss the moral and the practical issue of homelessness. [W]hat would be the... biblical resources we might... bring to bear on that particular feature of life?... And what response might be required of the church and of me?... I have anxiety that it be only reduced to my relationship with God or God's relationship with me.

The theological resources brought to bear by Changers on these questions include characteristic leitmotifs. One such is incarnation:

GW: This is part of the – I don't want to go into the Iona Community stuff, but the inspiration of the Community was incarnation... So our members [GW is a member] live – I think – very extraordinary lives, in an ordinary way... [I]t's: Turn over a stone and find an angel. It's in the consequences of our life and relationships and in the face of the stranger.

This has two related corollaries: transformation of persons and situations

TT: I think I would have, as one of the core features of my own understanding... as my core kind of principles, my own reading of the Bible, but I'll express it in terms of the New Testament... that Jesus did not come to leave people as he found them... Now whether it was changing the perspective of Pharisees, whether it was changing the life situation of a crippled individual, healing, whether it was awakening his disciples to not just who they were but who they might become, that sense of transformation, that sense of things being different afterwards...

and loving service

TT: [S]omewhere in the Christian tradition there is a call to serve... To wash your disciples', your neighbours' feet, to care for your neighbour... That message has to be there somewhere in the background, however it's been conveyed.

A third related concept is that of God's kingdom:

S: [I]f you're in a group, would it, you feel satisfied, would you go home with a job well done if you'd stuck to say the structural things, say how the Gospel of Mark was put together, what this historical background meant, that sort of thing, and it didn't have anything to do with current realities?

EB: I would be very unhappy about that... [O]ne of [Jesus'] greatest concerns was the concern for people and how they lived and what their grievances were, what their happiness was. I mean, you know, he was very much living for the people round about him. For a wedding, say. For people mentally ill, for people physically ill –

S: And so for you that translates into concern for the world as it is now?

EB: Yes, absolutely... I find it very difficult to appreciate a life of just prayer.

What do Changers gain from study?

Given this worldview, Changers would also find it very difficult to appreciate the Thinking emphasis on study for study's sake. However, since the Bible does form part of their motivation for action, how may Bible study nourish them? Unkindly, Changers' view of study could be described as pragmatic: whatever enables appropriate action is good. The following comment from a Changing minister illustrates this point negatively:

TC: [T]he book of Revelation seems to feature very high in amateur Bible study. It seems to be the most popular theme to talk about, one of the most disturbing themes to talk about, and it's mysterious, and therefore people like it... But if it's something which results in change or life change or social action of some sort then I think it's much more useful.

A more positive description comes from another minister's experience:

TT: I recently ran a series of elder training classes... [f]or prospective new elders, which began with a series of Bible studies on and about God calling different people. And the context was clearly inviting those who were prospective new elders to consider whether or not they had a sense of calling... It wasn't just: We'd like you to be an elder. Here you are. Like an invitation to a party... Or to join a group, or to join a committee. I wanted them to explore that this, as well as being an invitation, was also part of their Christian journey... Now, whether or not people would say that they were in fact able to explore that, you would have to ask them rather than me, but what I'm suggesting... is finding a contemporary context in which the thing came alive... And not just an historical: This is what happened to Isaiah, this is what happened to the fishermen, kind of a thing...

S: And is that a frequent technique, to start off with some idea of the contemporary experience and then move on to the text? Or is it more often a question of, We're studying this text, and then, What is your experience resonating with it?

TT: I guess my... instinct is to start with a contemporary experience. And in that way to mine the Scriptures... To see what resources our tradition can bring to bear on it. And one of the resources is clearly the biblical resource...

A variety of study methods may be found suitable to mine the biblical resource, depending on the skills brought by individual group members, since both Thinking and Relating approaches can be brought to bear on the subject in hand:

AS: [W]hen we were doing the miracles, my approach was, was very rational and pragmatic and Barclay-based... Whereas somebody else said, You know, there's a completely other way of approaching miracles, and that is to look at them, you know, to pray the miracle; and that was a much more, you know... Ignatian approach... And we did both... I mean, not on the same night. We did one miracle one way and another another.

Bad study, from a Changing perspective, occurs when the text under study says nothing to one's own experience. This may be because there appears to be no motivation to study:

TH: A couple of years ago in our... current study group, we'd take[n] a book of the Bible – and I can't even remember which one it was, I'm sure it was one of the letters – and it was just so turgid. There didn't seem to be anything; we were plodding through it verse by verse... It was the sort of plodding through it which I think killed it... Or... because we weren't really focussing on a particular issue. It was too disjointed, maybe... I think we'd maybe chosen it for not very good reasons... I don't know why we chose it. It wasn't that we'd a burning desire to study it or look at a particular aspect of it.

It may be because one's experiential expertise has been bypassed by group discussion:

AS: One time we read the book of Ruth... And I think at that time I felt that I didn't get a lot out of it... [P]artly because we got very bogged down in the end section of the Boaz story, and how all that fitted together, and how it lodged into the cultural norms and expectations of the time... I didn't feel I gained anything from it very much. But it seemed to me actually irrelevant... [t]o what I was reading of the book of Ruth... I was getting feelings of the value of kinship, the relationship of two women with each other and their care for each other in different ways, I was looking at the role of the wider family, which given my Indian upbringing I'm very alert to... and those sorts of things. And the question of... whether Naomi sent Ruth to seduce Boaz or whether Boaz seduced Ruth... seemed to me irrelevant in terms of what the story was about. So that's perhaps why.

Alternatively, one may find the theology of the text studied personally uncongenial:

SN: [O]ne time in the house group, we took the whole of Romans... And we... shared it out between us and did it over several weeks... each person each week took the next chunk of the thing... And I can't remember if I managed to be there for all of the process of Romans, but... I found parts of it pretty laborious... I think it's partly that I struggle with aspects of Paul's writing in any case... [T]here seemed to be quite a few parts of the text that were

repetitive... about the faith and the law and the relative place of those two aspects. And I wasn't... sure for me that by the end of the, however many weeks we spent on it, that I felt any more well-informed about Romans or that I felt it was a part of the Bible that I would spend more time with.

It must be stressed that, as observed above, unlike in a Relating group, Bible study is only one facet of a Changing group's activity:

SN: I've never felt that the house group has been, I've never thought of it as a Bible study group... I've always thought of it as a group in which I can share and explore my faith journey and, you know, get an understanding of other people's perspectives on different aspects of the faith... Whereas there are some of the other house groups, which are part of the church, that are very clearly Bible study groups... I mean, I don't know what the process is, because I haven't been to any of them, but they call themselves Bible study groups... And there's a sense around that base that that's what they see the purpose of their group as being: to study the Bible.

S: Whereas for your group, the Bible is one of the tools you take to illuminate your onward journey?

SN: Yes. Absolutely.

However, nor is Bible study an optional add-on:

WR: The spirit would be wrong suddenly if we turned atheist. We might find ways, we might feel that it's a very good supportive group anyway, and we'd find purposes to meet. But no, I think the sensible and simple answer to your question is that it is the Bible study that is the purpose to the group and is the scaffolding around which the group sort of hangs together and coheres.

How does a group of Changers work?

The next question to consider, then, is how a Changing group may be characterised.

Going by interviewees' descriptions, 'steady-state' may not be the best way to describe the development of the long-term Changing group observed. However, some stability is necessary for the development of sufficient confidence to voice and deal with challenging questions, as this Changer describes in a different context:

EP: I did go to one group which was led by a retired minister, who'd been a minister in India, and I felt he was extremely good, in that he was able to say, Well, I don't take this literally, or I don't really understand this. And I was really quite interested in that, because it was the first time I'd been with a

minister who... said, Look, I don't understand it either... [I]f you want an example of that, I think... we were talking about Ask and it shall be given... And he was saying, Well, you know, I pray a lot, and most of it isn't answered. I felt that I was able to discuss with him... things which I had taken for granted at an earlier age. As you get older you say, Well, hang on, I'm not sure this is true.

From this it appears that two aspects of group study – mutuality and honesty, resonating with the Relating and Thinking aspects of the group respectively – are prerequisite for a Changing group. Such qualities, however, are developed over the course of a long-term group where personalities have been rounded by interaction with one another:

WR: [I]t's been very odd that... without mentioning names, I've noticed over the years... in my case a softening and mellowing of my critical and analytical approach and sort of moving towards greater belief, but I've noticed on the part of others, becoming much more analytical, and moving away from an unquestioning acceptance of... belief and so on.

A group which sees diversity as a desideratum, however, must also have the capacity to deal with potentially less harmonious interaction, since it is bound to change in some respects every time new members join in.

ST: Yes, the group's changed because of people coming in from outside asking questions. It must have been quite uncomfortable for them to begin with, looking back, if we were the sort of group that thought we had our answers sorted out.

S: But it's a credit to you that you didn't reject them too.

ST: Oh, we never did that. We've had a few transients, and a few people who felt that the group wasn't for them, but I hope we've never been unwelcoming.

One problem participant, known to all groups, but a particular danger for those using experience as a major part of their study method, is the person with an *idée fixe*:

TC: The worst [studies] I've known have been where you have a person present who has a particular axe to grind, or a particular point of view that they must always promote in a given setting... I have an example, where I wasn't leading it, but... one of the members was. And a man had very, very strong opinions on such things as immigrants and homosexuals and various other

issues which he got very, very worked up about... disproportionately worked up about, and he completely ruined the session.

A Changing group, if it is working properly, will have both the Thinking resolution to challenge such views and the Relating determination to do it lovingly.

In practical terms, how has the long-term Changing group's programme worked out?

SN: [U]sually the person who's leading, whether we're doing a reading of the text or not, will give a kind of brief summary of aspects that they've identified that they find interesting or puzzling or whatever... And then it'll open up to general discussion... And as a group... on the whole we don't find we have much difficulty in having a... fairly free-flowing discussion about the content of the text... Some people talk very specifically about... how they've come to understand that text through Bible study... in other places... Some people will automatically be able to identify something in their life that that text resonates with... And then the leader at a particular point when either the discussion's kind of naturally come to an end or when the time's [getting on]... will then draw us together into prayer, and it's usually a prayer that in some clear way relates to the text we're looking at... Either a text, a prayer that's been taken from somewhere else or one that we've written ourselves, or whatever. And then we have a song... we try to identify a song in *Common Ground* that's related in some way. So that's... a fairly usual kind of structure for our group.

As with the long-term Relating group studied, prayer and worship form an integral part of Changing Bible study. Again like the long-term Relaters, the leader's role in such a group is more moderatorial than expert. Unlike the long-term Relaters, however, rather than relying on the imposed expertise of a study guide, every Changing group member must bring their own peculiar gifts into play, whether a Thinking knowledge of the Bible text under discussion or a Relating ability to connect its theme with their lives. This leads to an enhanced appreciation of approaches differing from one's own:

AS: I've learned a great deal for example from ST and TH about music, and the place of music in worship. I've learned... about much more radical views of what worship is about. And I've learned that, what I thought I valued most in church – which was formality and tradition, particularly

tradition, things like singing the psalms, which I love... And the need for a well-argued and well-structured sermon – I haven't lost that value, but I have learned that there are other ways of doing things, which are equally valuable in themselves; they aren't a replacement, but they are another dimension. We are very different people from very different backgrounds and with very different presents. And I think that we have all learned from each other.

Leadership for Changers

S: What would you say has made [for] a group that goes on being alive and vigorous for all this time?

TH: I think it's because the people who are involved in it are all equally involved in running it, so it's not really run by an outside person, or even by a leader... And... what we discuss and do together comes out of each person's own experiences. So it's very much tailored to what we feel is appropriate to our lives.

Such an egalitarian system has not evolved by chance, but has involved deliberate abnegation of power roles within the group:

ST: Well, we've never been a minister-led group. They've come in sometimes, but not very often. And a few years ago it seemed to TH and me that people were treating us as the authorities in the group, partly because it met at our house – which it had done because of young children – partly because we were the longest continuing members. So we said, We don't want this. This is everyone's group. Don't come to us for final decisions. And that cleared the air and ever since we've been an egalitarian group. J organises the decisions that we make in planning, and a few people are better at making sure we do what we said we'd do, but there aren't any leaders as such.

This description gives a picture of dialogical rather than banking learning, calling for responsibility to be taken by group leader and participants alike. This necessarily involves group members' confidence in their own ability to contribute meaningfully.

Initially this may be difficult for new participants to take on board, as one group member, a lecturer in further education with experience of dialogical education, comments:

WR: [F]or many students, they can only cope with a certain amount of innovation, and things as innovative as that [dialogical learning] would often leave people floundering and uncomfortable and feeling this was not really education, it's

not the way I do it – these kinds of problems. This is not the basic criticism of the approach, but its application leads to problems.

For the leader of such a group, too, the process of enabling dialogical study may go against one's own educational formation:

WR: [I]t's a shock in all kinds of ways. You have to look at the status of the teacher, and the teacher's own... investment in their professional ability and things of this kind. Which often are represented in terms of Freire's notion of the banking approach, standing there telling people the truth.

This may go some way to explaining why the particular group observed was without ministerial input: it takes a certain degree of detachment to step down from one's own hard-won expertise to become one group member among others. Moreover, such study relies on the ability of the session leader not to insist on her own interpretative goals but to attend to the group's own dynamic:

GW: It may well be that you thought a story had a political slant to it... And then it ends up that the people who are investigating it... may have some deep emotional thing to discuss... It's not what you wanted to start with, but it's what they need to talk about. You can't say at the end of the evening: We have learned this. At the beginning of [banking] Bible study you might say, We hope this night we might learn this. And at the end you say, Well, I hope we've learned it. But with this kind of study you can't do that... And that's why you do need all the skills of trying to draw it together.

In a good Changing group, leader and group members work together to this end.

Contrariwise, from the Changing perspective a leader's use of authority derived from status, whether clerical or academic, makes for a bad group:

WR: When we were in Thailand, V and I... we went and spent six months over three years teaching in the University of Thailand, and used to go to the... Anglican church in Bangkok, and we joined their housegroup. That was all right, but they had a couple of people who always sort of led it... One who was a non-stipendiary vicar... The other was a, I don't think he had taken orders, but he was very much involved with the church... and I found that they imposed their own viewpoints... to too great an extent... I don't think that's appropriate for housegroups, at least not for me... It's shared power, certainly, that I like. I'm politically inclined that way anyway, then all the things that come along with that, in that nobody's imposing particular

viewpoints, particular approaches themselves, other than briefly when they're leading. But again, generally people do very much lead from behind, they're not at all up-front and – what's the word I want? Putting pressure on you to take their own point of view.

Changers and community hermeneutics

This combination of independence of mind and interdependence of relationship made my using community hermeneutics with this group a challenging prospect. Unlike other groups in my fieldwork, where either I called the group into being or began the study period as a stranger to them, I participated in the group as a member for a term before trialling my method. This helped me in getting to know the group, most of whom I had already interviewed. On the first evening, during which – as usual in community hermeneutics – the theme was chosen by consensus, the method itself was also customised by the group, so that it could to some extent be owned by them.

Following up a suggestion made by an earlier interviewee, rather than endeavouring to follow the hermeneutical circle through a complete cycle on every study evening, we allotted each stage of the cycle a whole evening's attention. This meant that the group leader did not need to be overly directive in moving between hermeneutical stages in a short space of time – a directiveness which, while essential for specially constituted groups, would have been out of place here. Further, members of the group volunteered to take on the functions of both leader and scribe, leaving me to lead only on the second evening (close study), where my expertise could best be used. I retained responsibility for choosing the biblical texts for close study, though leaving the possibility open for group members to suggest suitable texts. The other innovation was that each week a summary of the proceedings was e-mailed round

group members, in order to keep those who could not attend particular meetings *au courant* with the process.

These innovations had both advantages and drawbacks. The greater level of time allotted to each stage of the cycle certainly enabled group discussion in depth, particularly in the close-study session. However, unavoidable absences of various group members during the process meant that they had not experienced significant aspects of the hermeneutical circle, though the e-mailed summaries helped. The fact that the whole cycle took place over more than a month also contributed to an overall lack of focus and continuity, a problem compounded by split leadership.

The most serious consequence of this was that the action section of the cycle was completely blocked. Because theoretical material on action rather than material from the previous weeks' work was made the basis of discussion, the question of change arising from the study process itself was hardly considered. This misunderstanding demonstrated one of the difficulties of Changing study mentioned above: the inevitable tension between the varied interests of a self-directed learning group and the specific goals of the facilitator. On the positive side, this mishap reduced the danger of the researcher projecting a 'halo effect' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 116) onto a congenial group of people. Some of the factors leading to this outcome are analysed in more depth below (see Chapter 8).

Theme

Since the group's termly agenda is routinely decided by consensus, the task of choosing a theme resonating with experience was easily accomplished. Interestingly, though the theme chosen – conflict and harmony in personal relationships – was

consonant with the individualistic concerns of Thinkers as well as the ethical concerns of Relaters, it did not easily lend itself to group action of a Changing variety (see discussion below). It was established in feedback, however, that the group had dealt with more potentially Changing concerns in the recent past and did not wish to go back over old ground.

Experience

Depending on whether their Relating or Thinking aspect predominates, individual Changers find disclosure of their own personal experience more or less easy.

In theory, however, they find the priority of experience as a learning tool a

sine qua non:

S: You come to the book of Ruth, and you use what you've experienced in some way to understand what Ruth is about. Would that be a fair way [to describe it]?

AS: I don't see that you could do otherwise... I think my understanding of anything comes from the person I am because of the life I've had. And therefore it isn't really a question of choice.

The use of personal experience as a learning tool has frequently been significant in group members' lives beyond the church context:

SN: [S]ome of the more formal work that I've done with people with learning disabilities was involved in resettling people out of long-stay hospitals... And the process of actually getting to know people in a different way to the way that they were projected through the reports coming out of the hospital was very, very important... Again, working with people with mental health difficulties... a lot of the time was spent just letting people talk about things that had happened to them, particularly as part of the kind of psychiatric/medication/hospitalisation process... And in the creative writing workshops, I always start the process off by some kind of meditation, which then is followed by people just free-writing... I definitely want to offer opportunities that have within them a process which accesses people's own experience and understanding.

This does not mean, however, that interpretation of the texts has nothing to say to life, since the hermeneutical process is allowed to run full circle:

S: I'm not sure whether you're using experience to interpret the Bible, or the Bible to interpret the experience.

SN: Well... I don't think it's possible to... say either/or. I think it's a kind of interweaving, really, I would say.

Historical-critical close study

As one might expect in a group containing both Thinkers and Relaters, some participants found historical-critical methods more congenial than others:

SN: [W]e have [compared Gospel parallels]... and... we usually rely on... the one person in the group who... seems particularly knowledgeable about who different people are, and why there are differences between the Gospels... [B]ut there are also always unanswered questions... And... I think some of the group are quite content just to acknowledge that there's the mysterious part... And some get more frustrated because they feel that they want to know more categorically... Why and how and all that kind of stuff.

The variety of responses offered by such analysis can be attractive from a Changing point of view, as someone from another group, which went through the cycle of community hermeneutics during each study session, commented:

NC: [D]epending how good the group were on the day at spotting things, you could find, not only were there different approaches between, I don't know, Mark and Luke... But then somebody in the group would find that the Mark was good, and somebody else would find the Luke was good. And then the fact that there was diversity turned out to be positive, and not some kind of problem that we had to get over, because it was source theory that was actually causing a disruption. It actually turned out to be positive sometimes.

Close reading of the Nazareth pericopes (see below Chapter 9 for Thinking and Relating treatments of the same passages) by the Changing group brought two aspects of the Gospels into focus. The complex levels of relationship and motive which could be discerned below surface readings of the text intrigued the Thinkers of the group; insight into the humanity of Jesus and the degree of conflict involved in

his own relationships struck the Relaters. In feedback it was considered – characteristically for Changers – that if the group were to try community hermeneutics again, resources for this aspect of the study could be found within the group rather than having to depend on an external expert.

Connection

Like that of Relaters, Changers desire to connect their own experiences with the texts they study. How, then, does the Changing strategy of connection differ? As I hoped through my initial choice of community hermeneutics as a model for interpretation, the close study of the texts which Thinkers find so attractive can offer a Changing group means towards the Relating goal of bringing the stories to life:

TH: I'm aware that the different Gospel writers have different slants on things... And if we're talking about the same incident, some of those extra details from one of them might shed a bit of light on some problem in the other. Or they may be quite different incidents, but similar types of story. And sometimes one event affects the next one. The story of Jairus' daughter – there's that other story stuck in the middle of that... I think it's all part of making the thing come to life and to make some sense out of what happened, and what it might... have meant to people then and now.

Moreover, the very use of historical-critical methods highlighting differences between the texts can parallel current approaches to Christianity which value diversity with the diverse situations of the Gospel authors and communities, each struggling to reinterpret the stories of Jesus for its own context:

EW: Well, in the context of the ecumenical theme... people with different views... are not necessarily wrong; the different views are – no, that's wrong, the different emphases... [in] the Gospels, being written by different people, had their different insights [into] different situations. [S]o it's not just reading the words, it's reading round about, it's reading between the lines, if you like... [W]e're trying to find the truth about the Gospel writers, trying to live with the truth, but we come at it from, you know – Painting! Different painters can portray in a totally different way... the same subject, the same story, the same feelings perhaps.

In practice, as one might expect, those group members who had a higher degree of Relating in their hermeneutical approach found it easier to make connections than the Thinkers in the group.

Appropriation

My interest here is not in imposing artificial limits on the whole spectrum of appropriation of the biblical texts, described by this Changing minister:

TT: [A]t various levels, whether it was in terms of somebody's understanding of faith, in terms of somebody's understanding of a particular passage or their own insight in faith... Or as an expression of their Christian commitment to serve meals at the [drop-in] centre on a Monday night, or... push a hospital trolley, take somebody from their ward to a chapel on the Sunday morning in the hospital, or whatever... I would hope that there would be at whatever level some kind of transformation.

Given that the new insight coming from Thinking study is insufficient as a study goal for Changers, however, in what ways can their appropriation of the texts be distinguished from that of Relaters? Should, for example, the mutually supportive community formed by a long-term group come into the category of Changing transformation?

TH: I think the end goal of all this kind of stuff is helping each other get through life, which is a very puzzling kind of experience, in a lot of ways... [B]ut there's also... the kind of struggles that everybody has from day to day or week to week: all kinds of things – health, relationships... disasters – it's all about helping people to make sense of that and supporting each other. Because I think the primary aim of our housegroup is mutual support. And the kind of study side of it... is just a part of that...

Arguably such supportive mutuality has great significance for group members. Yet its very supportiveness is paralleled by that of the long-term Relating group already described (see Chapter 6). Another difference in connecting text and experience, highlighted in the discussion of Relating above, is neatly demonstrated by

two reactions to the biblical texts evinced by one Changing interviewee at different stages of life:

ST: I can think of two different examples. The first is that in my more evangelical days we decided in our group to fast, because the Bible said it was a good thing. That's rather crude! So we discussed how long for, and people's experience of fasting came into it, and we did it. But it didn't make me feel a better person or nearer to God. I just felt hungry. And the other example, I'm not sure if it counts. It was after we were reading a book by Richard Holloway, one of the ones he bases on the Bible, and we'd read a section on homelessness. And it affected us because it's such an obvious issue in Scotchester. So we made an arrangement with the [homeless drop-in centre], which we still keep up. But that's not directly biblical.

The first example given describes a conservative Relating attempt to shape experience in ways consonant with the biblical texts, acknowledging their prior authority. Yet however laudable, this attempt appears to have failed in the Relating terms of building character.

The second describes a reversal of that dynamic, which is not only liberal but also Changing. Not only does the group connect their prior and continuing experience of seeing people in need on the streets of Scotchester with the biblical injunction, mediated by Holloway's book, to care for homeless people. In addition, the Changing group decides to act on this connection. In distinction to the Relating mode, whether conservative or liberal, Changing appropriation of the biblical texts is defined by its active engagement in the world beyond the group.

Three further witnesses within the Changing group observed chronicle the development of the group's response to the same situation over time:

AN: There seemed to be an awful lot of talk going on about outreach, about the world, about homelessness, talk talk talk, and no action... And a lot of us were frustrated in that... And we felt that if we couldn't do anything, at least

as well as talking about it we could pray about it... And we started what we called 'A time to pray', at seven o'clock every Wednesday...

AS: [T]here was a period when we were getting involved with work with the homeless in Scotchester. And for a period of about two years...we participated in a venture that was serving an evening meal to people, homeless people... And this was something which by then had drawn in many members of the congregation as well as ourselves... They supported us, in all kinds of ways; they supported us with money, with driving, with all kinds of things; by coming to the evening – we did a Monday evening once a month... And [after having to stop supporting that project] we now have, we are in the event a [local drop-in centre] support group... And... on the second Sunday of every month we collect for the [centre], and once a month we take down about £200 cash and a car boot filled full of tins, toiletries and things for the [centre]... And WR goes to the [centre] and acts as a conduit for the congregation to express their concern.

WR: [The practical application] is getting now into a routine, rather than a sort of fresh initiative all the time, so it doesn't actually impinge much on my consciousness, you know. I go off to the [centre] in the morning... They [the group] collect food and stuff, you know. [I]t's a kind [of] practical routine, rather than an ideological issue.

Which of these actions are Changing? It could be argued that Changing actions should include more of an ideological dimension, as well as the practical routine of service described here. Such an analysis might also distinguish between study and prayer, which lead to service offered, and challenging the unjust structures – whether of church or society – which make such service necessary.

However, even on that basis it is not always easy to discern whether a particular action supports or challenges the status quo, is more Relating or more Changing. It could be argued, for example, that the drop-in centre, which offers its clients support in changing their lives as well as a hot meal and a change of clothes, challenges a purely service ethos. Similarly, the following account of a process leading to church members taking up leadership positions might be classified as a Relating one, operating within the bounds of the congregation for the congregation's benefit:

TT: Of the group – of the most recent group – of people who came to the prospective elders training course, seven or eight of them came really saying, as they began, 'I'm coming because you've invited me, but I will not be becoming an elder'... And there was, come the end of the process, a 100% takeup... Now, could you demonstrate cause and effect? Could I say that it was because of the Bible study that that happened, as opposed to conversations with existing elders, as opposed to a number of other factors?... It would be hard, I think, to demonstrate cause and effect. But... I think I would, for my own perspective, I think I would be happy to at least claim a certain correlation.

Equally, however, it might be argued that a process leading to more diverse representation on the eldership, and the valuing of those who had previously thought they could not take up such a role, might also be a Changing action, challenging the power structures of a church. It seems that no one diagnostic can establish the Changing credentials of all acts of transformation, yet this is not surprising for a worldview which emphasises the specific contextuality of personal experience.

Possession of some degree of power may be one prerequisite for considering change, when understood as challenge to the status quo. This may be one reason why few of the Thinkers or Relaters involved in my fieldwork – not many of them in leadership positions – engaged with the Action section of the cycle. Significantly, the ordinands, who could reasonably expect to wield some power in their future churches, were an exception to this rule. For the long-term Changing group observed, however, on the periphery of the church institution, possessing little power except over its own structures and actions, the question: How can we make a difference? is both simpler to ask and harder to address.

AS: And we're currently thinking about how we might address exactly the issues... what's going on in the world today. And the fact that we're constantly being urged... as members of the church, to be involved in issues of world poverty... What do we do about this?... [O]ne of the suggestions that was made was that we might engage in sustained and focussed letter-writing, to MPs, to lobbying people... I think we might find a way of doing

that, and again of drawing people in... And we might find a way of... looking to apply in some practical manner the things we talk about: change the rules... [I]t's all very well to have a fete and raise some money and post it off to Christian Aid. But actually, you know, that's a very flimsy sticking plaster... If we believe what we say, if we believe... that, you know, Not one of these falls to the ground without our Father – then what on earth are we doing about it? And the answer is: Not a lot... What do you do which is actually going to have a positive effect? I mean, I think that going to Genoa [antiglobalisation demonstration], I'm not saying that doesn't have an effect, I'm sure it does, but... there must be more things one could do. So... I think we'll come back to this and see... how we can react to that.

Frustratingly, the possibility of engendering action specifically from the cycle of community hermeneutics during my fieldwork with the Changing group was blocked. Notwithstanding, this group, currently exploring ways to make links with people at grassroots level involved in the Palestinian situation, certainly has Changing action as one of its goals. To some extent, group study of the Bible, seen as an aid to their transformative endeavours, may have been bypassed thus far. Yet one comment from the group (TH), that it was 'helpful to focus on the Bible as a "working tool" for faith rather than just a source of revelation for reflection', gives room for hope that community hermeneutics or a similar study method may yet prove of use to them.

Appraisal

As should already have become apparent, the Changing group studied has as many members whose first preferred interpretative mode is Thinking or Relating as those who are first and foremost Changers. Pure Changing, indeed, would not necessarily lead to a group that functions well. For example, in a purely Changing environment with insufficient Relating input, there can be too much emphasis on changing the rest of the world at the expense of the group's focus on God and each other:

NC: [J]ust occasionally some of the things that are world-focussed focus totally on how you should help other people, but don't actually help you to get into a position where you can help other people... [S]ometimes justice goes too far... It stays too far away from home for too long, and you don't get any... [W]e did a thing at school once about Mother Teresa, and we were asked to have a class debate about whether it was a waste of her time saying the Hours and the Lessons of the Church, and I always think that's very important, that even someone who did as great a work as Mother Teresa out there still spent some time saying the Offices of the Church and concentrating on her religious life as well. And sometimes, justice-based Bible studies and stuff like that spend all the time out of doors and they never come back.

The temptation here might be to a Changing self-righteousness vis-à-vis other standpoints. Enabling Changing action while bypassing Thinking analysis can also be problematic, as one interviewee commented:

EP: [S]ome of the Lent groups that I have been in have been much more... just trying to take some message about what is this passage saying to us and what should we therefore do... And not go through the critical process.

According to another interviewee, the process of community hermeneutics did not set the expectation of Changing as a prerequisite for study:

NG: I have the feeling that in your type of Bible study it might emerge that [Changing transformation] wasn't... set as a goal right at the start. At least, I had that impression.

Using community hermeneutics, in fact, a Changing conclusion can only be reached if group participants are already inclined to do so; the choice of theme, though influential, is indicative rather than causative of the mode of appropriation in which the group chooses to engage. If people's minds are already made up to Changing action, however, does studying the Bible make any difference to what they were planning to do in any case?

S: [D]o you think – I mean, this is a difficult question – do you think that you're the sort of caring, socially aware people that would be doing these things anyway, or do you think your Christian commitment and your Bible study have made a difference in that respect?

EB: Well, I wonder. I don't know. I think, I think probably we're all of a like mind, we're all concerned, you know?... I don't really know the answer to that. I know that I have always sort of been concerned, because that was my work, because that is what I was interested in... The others, I think in the way I've heard them talking... yes I think we're all concerned. And I suppose the Bible study just confirmed [it].

This impression, that the presuppositions generated by one's worldview and personal experience – rather than the Bible studied by group members coming *tabulae rasae* to the texts – govern the Changing appropriation of the Gospels in small-group church Bible study, is confirmed by the honest testimony with which this chapter began:

S: And that [setting up a lunch club] came out of the Bible study?

EP: Yes, sort of, it started from that, yeah. I mean, I had the thought in my mind.

Should such an admission, indeed, not be expected of people who look into their experience in the world to discern God's action and how to work with it? However, the hermeneutical circle will not be denied. How can one recognise God's action in one's own experience without recourse to the biblical testimony and its multiple portraits of divinity at work? As even the most radical member of the Changing group admits:

TH: The Bible's obviously highly important. It's probably, because I know it so well, it probably has more influence on me than the other [scriptures]... It's my home tradition, and... a lot of it's in memory... not the sort of memory that says chapter and verse... But it's more the sort of thing you get in St Paul: 'Somewhere it says...' And so it's a tradition that I've imbibed... And it is a base... to a lot of my thinking. I guess it will always be.

8. Validation:

how does my theory compare with others in the field?

The previous three chapters have described the grounded theory of lay appropriation of the Gospels, as it has been built up from my fieldwork. Now this theory must be tested for validity by the grounded theory criteria of fit, understanding, generality and control. Feedback from both my fieldwork participants and peer group ministers tests the comprehensibility of my grounded theory. Generality is tested by considering how far my theory can analyse and might have been able to predict conflicts within the groups observed. Evidence for some degree of control offered to leader and group members alike by their understanding of different study modes is presented. The rest of the chapter considers theories of general and specifically of Christian adult education within which my grounded theory finds its place, focussing again on the location of expertise in the different models of study presented.

Criteria for validation

The first requisite property [of a grounded theory] is that the theory must closely *fit* the substantive area in which it will be used. Second, it must be readily *understandable* by laymen [sic] concerned with this area. Third, it must be sufficiently *general* to be applicable to a multitude of diverse daily situations within the substantive area, not to just a specific type of situation. Fourth, it must allow the user partial *control* over the structure and process of daily situations as they change through time (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 237) [authors' emphasis].

Local-church small-group Bible study could be categorised within several substantive areas of interest. My particular research question locates it within the field of adult education, and validation of my grounded theory with respect to that substantive area is the major topic of this chapter. It could, however, be understood in other contexts, for example faith development within individual and church

community. Had I observed more groups in the high Episcopalian, Roman Catholic or Orthodox traditions, meditative or liturgical aspects of appropriating the biblical texts (see Appendix IV) might well have formed a larger part of fieldwork data and thus have made my theory more comprehensive. Here, however, I take comfort from Glaser's comments:

In generating good ideas, the grounded theorist must always remember that it is what he [sic] does say that matters, not what he does not say. The analyst must work with what material he has. He cannot work with what he hasn't and therefore he need spend little or no time lamenting it (Glaser 1978, 10).

I will, then, be testing my grounded theory for fit with general and specifically Christian theories of adult education. Before considering this in detail, however, I shall consider Glaser's and Strauss' other criteria for a good grounded theory: understanding, generality and control.

Understanding

I have attempted to test my theory for interpretative validity (see also Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 107) against the understandings of my interviewees. This 'reality check' was intended to address the possibilities of misunderstanding or bias on my part. This was possible, however, only to the extent that interviewees wished to co-operate in this endeavour. I offered several options for feedback, as the e-mail I sent to those participants with access to the Internet explains:

I'd be very grateful for your reaction to different methods of feedback I might use, in order a) to bother you as little as possible but b) to give you as much opportunity as you would like to participate in the research process... The options for me to pursue are:

- a) Send a computer file which just gives the snippets of your interview I'd like to use, so you can confirm that you indeed said words to that effect.
- b) Send the file plus diagrams of the ways of Bible study I've discovered which I've associated with you, so you can agree or disagree with what I say.

(NB many people are likely to identify with some parts of more than one of the ways of study I've found).

c) Send the file plus all three diagrams so you can see what I think you're doing less of as well as what you do more.

d) Send each quotation with its immediate context in the right chapter (say, that A4 page) plus all three diagrams.

e) Send the whole of each of the relevant chapters (about 40pp each) plus all three diagrams.

These options go from the least amount of paper I'll need to prepare and send out (and you'll need to read and comment on!) to the most. My aim in all this is to be sure I've not horrendously misinterpreted what's going on in group Bible study, as well as to avoid inducing paranoia in people if you don't see what use is being made of your pearls of wisdom... You might even want to discuss my results as a group.

While everyone agreed to option a), allowing a few minor corrections to be made for clarity, fewer people showed interest in the other feedback options. Those who did react have done so, gratifyingly, in a manner which could have been predicted according to mode:

Thinker

- Several Thinkers asked to see all three chapters (option e). However, consonant with the Thinking dislike of using personal experience, none commented on these beyond agreement as to the accuracy of my observations. For example:
TT: Your categories of thinker, changer and relater are quite fascinating and I was very interested to read how you distinguished and interpreted the material in these different ways... I think you have given a fair and accurate assessment of my own thoughts and comments... when I explained your categories to my wife, she also agreed with your assessment.

Relater

- Some highly literate conservative Relating participants, having seen the schema relating to their method of study (option b), responded that the diagram made no sense to them, and showed no interest in further clarification. The remainder of the group – also middle-class, educated people – declined this option, on the grounds that they would not be able to understand my research ('I think anything more detailed [than the interview quotations] could be beyond us.') John Hull's work on factors preventing Christian adults from learning (see discussion below) is germane in this context.
- One middle-class group, composed largely of liberal Relaters but including Thinkers, met together to study all three schemas (option c) and sent me a group response, illustrating both their understanding of my analysis and the way their social class affects their interpretation (see further Appendix I).
THINKER: Just what it says. Having an analytical mind with keen understanding of the text and discussion in hand using personal open-ended interpretation of scripture.

CHANGER: Someone who is able to change their personal view of the world, their faith and their life in general by intellectual means, NOT someone who wants to change others or the world [group's emphasis].

RELATER: Someone who relates to people, likes to be involved with people and is concerned for their neighbour. We debated if the word could have meant 'narrator' – telling stories about our life and experiences.

Changer

- Unlike the majority of my interviewees, several individuals with Changing aspects to their study mode wanted to see either all three schemas or all the material available. One expressed the (uncommon) desire to read the whole thesis when finished.
- Another took issue with my classification of their preferred appropriative mode as Changer, then Relater, then Thinker. The response they gave [my italics emphasise the different modes of appropriation being described] illustrates the complex interplay of appropriative strategies developed over time:
DT: I have to say that I agree with you in your interpretation of my being a Relater, but in order to be a Relater... I had to be a Thinker first. For some time I had been very aware that I had to do a great deal of analysing and *thinking* about my life and personal situation [pressure leading to breakdown] in order to do something about it. Through doing this it became evident to me that there was a need for *change* and in order to create a situation that I was comfortable with I had to accept that I was the one to do the changing. I used various *supports* to do the changing. One of the supports was the Church, which led me to prayer... worship, Bible reading and the use of my talents...

My analysis had picked up on the individual's Changing and Relating emphasis, but had missed the underlying Thinking capacity, which had analysed the situation precipitating this development in order to deal with it. Here is an example of personal experience being 'thicker' and richer than any theoretical categories (see Chapter 2).

- A third Changer demonstrated both understanding of my typology and their preferred mode of appropriation by making use of it to analyse and improve the dynamic of a Lent study group, inaugurated by them as a result of their positive experience with community hermeneutics:
EP: [Y]our classification has given me an insight in what has been happening in our P Lent Group this year that has been really helpful. We had all three types in the one group and there was quite a rift between the Thinkers and the Changers at the next to last meeting. Recognising the three 'points of view' helped me to handle the situation more knowledgeably and sensitively.

Such a marked correlation between participants' chosen level and manner of interaction with my work and my diagnosis of their favoured mode indicates, even

before more general correlation with adult-education theories has been considered, that participants' use of these modes of appropriation extends further than Bible study alone.

It is ironic in this context to note Strauss' and Glaser's own ambivalence about the abilities of lay people to comprehend and use grounded theory:

It is more difficult for laymen [sic] in a particular area to understand a formal theory, because of its abstractness and presumed general applicability. It will have to be explained for them to understand its usefulness, and chances are they will not be able to apply it themselves (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 240)

However, given their strictures I have also validated my theory by peer group review from others with experience of academic hermeneutics and of leading small-group Bible studies in churches – 'people working in the substantive area' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 239). In order to address the possibility of investigator bias, I asked three male colleagues from different cultures (America, Scotland and Zambia), each of whom is more familiar than I with a conservative theological background, to comment on Chapters 5-7, particularly noting my analysis of the conservative Relating group observed. While their reactions warned me not to expect everyone holding similar theologies to react in the same way – two of them citing African and Asian instances of conservative Changing study – in general my fieldwork data were consonant with their own experiences of small-group Bible study.

Generality

If my theory fits the specific data given and is understandable to the people it describes and to other specialists in the field, how generalisable is it? Put another way, how well, in Glaser's terms, does it 'work'?

By *work*, we meant that a theory should be able to explain what happened, predict what will happen and interpret what is happening in an area of substantive or formal inquiry (Glaser 1978, 4) [author's emphasis].

Two techniques testing generalisation, investigator triangulation (using a different group leader) and reliability as equivalence (interviewing before groupwork), have already been mentioned in Chapter 4. These both produced similar patterns to my results laid out in Chapters 5-7. To answer this question in more depth, however, in addition to citing the witness of the Changer quoted above who found the theory useful in her own groupwork, I should like to consider in more detail three instances during the generally smoothly running study process where conflict occurred. Can these difficult situations be interpreted, and could they have been predicted, by use of my theory? Such situations are significant for what they reveal about researcher and participants alike, as Sherryl Kleinman explains in 'Field-Workers' Feelings: What We Feel, Who We Are, How We Analyze':

[E]xamine your emotional reactions to the setting, the study and the participants. If you do not, your feelings will still shape the research process, but you will not know how. Our attitudes affect what we choose to study, what we concentrate on, who we hang around with or interview, our interpretation of events, and even our investment of time and effort in the field. ... When we have strongly negative feelings in the field, we should ask ourselves: Which of my values (or which valued self) is being threatened? In analyzing our reactions we should recognize what we want the organization or group to fulfill for us... We need to know who we are as we begin – which identities are central or problematic (Kleinman 1991, 184-85).

Here are the cases, in descriptions condensed from recordings of group study:

- While the group [Group 8] is trying to differentiate between Matthew's 'poor in spirit' and Luke's 'poor' in the Beatitudes, a Thinker mounts a sustained attack on the use of historical criticism as follows: The differences between the same story in different Gospels are minuscule. The same semantic field in the original Aramaic would probably cover both versions. Interviewing two people about the same incident always results in different wording. The process of crystallising tradition is necessarily influenced by the Gospellers' personalities, sources and communities; is it not then the sense of the story rather than the variations on which one should focus?

During the subsequent interview with them it emerges that the person concerned, a highly competent and highly paid expert in their own field, did not feel sufficiently briefed on the whole process to be confident with it and also felt uncomfortable with the use of personal experience within this group. Moreover, they had been looking for a demonstration of hermeneutical competence from the group (largely consisting of academically trained ministers) rather than an invitation to expose their own supposed inadequacies by joining in the process.

- A study group [Group 5] in the second stage of community hermeneutics, divided into two smaller groups, is using historical-critical methods to study the infancy narratives from Matthew and Luke. In one small group a liberal Relater is already making connections with present-day church life. In the other group a Thinker and a more Catholic Relater become embroiled in the historicity or otherwise of the Virgin Birth. One wants to know how it correlates with known historical dates; the other finds it offensive to question the tradition. In plenary, the two Relaters come to verbal blows, silencing the Thinker. The liberal Relater insists that the Thinker's focus on history is irrelevant, as all we need to know about Jesus comes from our own experience. The Catholic Relater holds that we only know God through the biblical texts as they are, not through differentiation between Gospels. This contretemps occurs within a group where relationships are shaky: the Thinker is in the group for the first time; the liberal Relater has missed two sessions; the Catholic Relater frequently arrives late. A subsequent interview with the Catholic Relater makes it clear that, having missed the first session, through the whole course the individual concerned has had no idea that a specific pattern of group study has been on offer.
- The liberal/radical long-term group I study last [Group 6], when my theory is already in process of crystallisation, is largely composed of members with Changing aspects to their study modes. By prior agreement, group leadership is out of my hands. Partly because it would complete my theory and partly because I identify Changing aspects within my own study mode, I am hoping that this group, if any, will have the resources and the motivation to turn Bible study into action beyond the group. On the evening of the Action stage of community hermeneutics, one of the strongest Changers is absent, Relaters are thin on the ground and the leadership is in the hands of a Thinker who has already admitted in interview to finding the overt use of personal experience problematic. The evening's discussion is almost completely theoretical, and the question of action is left unaddressed. The following week, during feedback, I tearfully express my disappointment.

What is happening at these points of tension within the study process? The same answer can be given in all three situations: people who appropriate the texts in one way assume, incorrectly, that everyone else shares or should share their own mode of appropriation. In consequence, communication within the group is disrupted, or its absence is highlighted.

In the first example, a perceived hierarchy of understanding within a heavily ministerial group has left this particular Thinker self-positioned at the bottom of the 'expert' pecking order, yet the study method used has entailed the leader's conscious avoidance of 'depositing' in participants the information wherewith to become expert. This has frustrated the Thinker concerned. As someone drawing a good salary they are also vulnerable to the potentially Changing thematic focus on riches and poverty, a focus chosen without their agreement. Their only defence is attack: an attack as coherent and sustained as one would expect from a competent Thinker.

In the second case, no group consensus on what study mode is appropriate has developed; nor has individuals' ability – even that of the two Relaters concerned, more liberal and more Catholic respectively – to discuss within the group the divergence of their aims of textual appropriation. The historical-critical section of the study has been hijacked by the personal experience of the former, while the faith understanding of the latter has left no room for manoeuvre. The Thinker, penalised for expressing that thirst for historical knowledge which Relaters find unimportant, does not return to the group in subsequent weeks. Ironically, this is an ecumenical group drawn from churches in the process of agreeing to covenant together. Though the overall group theme is unity and the subtheme of that week is 'unity in diversity', it is the *disunity* of appropriative modes between group members which has scuppered the group's hermeneutical chances.

The last case highlights a group in which diversity is welcomed and group process is well practised. What has gone wrong here? The first point to make is that the group as constituted on that evening is no longer the same group which during interview,

three months earlier, stressed its habitual practice of sharing and reflecting together on personal experience. Apart from my own alien presence, since the end of the interviewing process two participants have rejoined the group after years elsewhere; two more new members also attend on a sporadic basis. As its communal identity has altered, the group's Relating ability has inevitably been disrupted – temporarily, one hopes – by these changes.

The leader's role also comes into focus: both that of the Thinker who – doubtless unconsciously – has avoided the necessity of discussing personal experience with a view to action but also, in the following week, my own. Conducting the feedback session, I am angry with myself for not having foreseen the problem and asked another group member to lead the session on action. Unreasonably, I am also angry with the group for not having lived up to my Changing expectations. Yet again, the failure to take into account the interpretative modes of other group members has resulted in a breakdown in communication, and hence in hermeneutical competence.

Control

This brief analysis demonstrates the potential for my theory to be used as an explanatory tool *post factum*. Does it, however, give the hermeneutical practitioner, whether study group leader or participant, the ability to minimise such tensions and maximise the fruitfulness of group Bible study? Issues of hierarchy already raised in the interpretative context render the idea of 'control' exerted by the group leader somewhat suspect. Yet for leader and group members alike, the variety in aims and methods of textual appropriation which is capable of wreaking such havoc may also prove to be a valuable resource, if participants can learn from one another's modes of

appropriation instead of being blocked by them. The testimony of the long-term Changing group (see Chapter 7) and the Changing feedback on groupwork referenced above both indicate that this is feasible.

Both the facilitator who is aware of group members' hermeneutical preferences and the group members who are sensitised to differences in appropriation start out with a major study advantage, reducing the likelihood of mutual misunderstanding as well as widening the range of appropriate study modes available. For while a good group leader will present biblical material in the primary ways that nourish each participant – facts for the Thinkers, values for the Relaters, action for the Changers – she may also wish to challenge her group's hermeneutical assumptions. I shall return to this point in Chapter 10.

Arguably, then, my theory is understandable, general and allows some degree of control. Yet how does it fit into its field of substantive interest? One of the leitmotifs of grounded theory is its stress on building up theory *de novo*. My reading before beginning my fieldwork, therefore, focussed largely on the field of biblical hermeneutics. Having built up my grounded theory, however, it is time to consider how it fits into the wider framework of adult-educational theory.

Theories of adult education

The following is not intended to provide a comprehensive survey of the field, nor will the theories instanced be discussed in great detail. Instead, points of contact between them and my grounded theory will be considered in order to throw more light on the latter. My interest will focus on two specific areas of adult-educational theory where resonance with my theory is to be found: individual learning models

based on personality types and the learner-centred approach of Rogers and Knowles. After using Hull's critique of the non-learning Christian adult, I then assess the place of community hermeneutics within a range of possible approaches to Christian religious education: religious instruction, faith community, spiritual development, liberation, and interpretation.

Individual learning models

My discernment of three modes of textual appropriation, Thinking, Relating and Changing, available to adult learners within local-church Bible study groups, has much in common with personal construct theory, developed by George Kelly (Kelly 1955). Kelly's theory may be summarised as follows: 'A person's processes are psychologically canalized by the ways in which he anticipates events' (Kelly 1955, 46). This basic theory is amplified by a number of corollaries, described here in Jess Feist's *Theories of Personality* (Feist 1985). Some are completely compatible with my theory. For example:

1. Construction Corollary. We anticipate future events according to our interpretations of recurrent themes.
2. Individuality Corollary. People have different experiences and therefore construe events in different ways.
6. Range Corollary. Constructs are limited to a particular range of convenience, that is, they are not relevant to all situations.
9. Fragmentation Corollary. Our behavior is sometimes inconsistent because our construct system can readily admit incompatible elements.

These points are consistent with my suggestion that each member of a Bible study group uses a characteristic process of textual appropriation within the study process, which in many cases, however, is not a totally homogeneous version of any one of the three appropriative modes I have isolated.

7. Experience Corollary. We continually revise our personal constructs as the result of experience.

8. Modulation Corollary. Not all new experiences lead to a revision of personal constructs. To the extent that constructs are permeable they are subject to change through experience. Concrete or impermeable constructs resist modification regardless of our experience.

These points are compatible to a varying extent with my theory, depending on the particular mode of appropriation under consideration. Whereas Thinkers and Changers demonstrate relatively permeable constructs, susceptible (at least in theory) to change in the light of new external evidence, whether ideas or experiences, Relaters' constructs, whether conservative or liberal, being based on an authoritative value system, are more likely to be impermeable.

10. Commonality Corollary. To the extent that we have had experiences similar to others, our personal constructs tend to be similar to the construction systems of those people.

11. Sociality Corollary. We are able to communicate with others because we can construe their constructions. We not only observe the behaviour of others, but we also interpret what that behavior means to them (Feist 1985, 587-88).

Again, to some extent my findings bear out Kelly's theory. It was notable that the groups of Thinkers and Relaters studied were relatively homogeneous in their appropriative strategies. Some demographic homogeneities were also noted within these groups – though a quantitative substantiation of this observation would need to be made over a much larger statistical sample. Members of the less homogeneous Changing group, however, showed the additional ability to construe, if partially, the constructions of those group members whose mode of appropriation differed from their own. In this instance, Kelly's theory can be expanded by the implications of my own.

Other corollaries less compatible with my observations – that all personal constructs are dichotomous, that their order is structured hierarchically and that the construct giving a greater degree of future choice is chosen – may speak of Kelly's own cultural background as much as of the ways in which all individuals everywhere may operate. Undue influence from one's own context is always a hazard in theory building, and one from which mine may not be immune.

Other attempts at personality classification useful for adult-education theory abound, from the simple to the complex. Fiedler's theory of task-orientated/relationship-orientated leadership (Fiedler 1974) could be correlated with my Thinker/Relater categories but, like Kelly's constructs, do not allow for possibilities beyond the dichotomous either-or. Kolb's fourfold classification of learning styles, on the other hand (Kolb 1984) – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation – achieve a closer correlation with the four stages of the hermeneutical cycle than that of my own typology. Extending my theory from its largely Reformed context – for example, following up meditative or liturgical modes of textual appropriation (see Appendix IV) – might yield a greater subtlety of distinction. Much more complex classifications of learning types are also well documented: for example, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI (see Keirsey and Bates 1984) gives a breakdown of sixteen distinct types, based on combinations of four Jungian bipolarities. Correlation of MBTI types and my appropriative modes might be a fruitful endeavour.

Yet all these indicators, focussing on the characteristics of individuals, lack the relational dimension of groupwork which my typology takes into account. Even the

group-focussed ideas of Belbin (1993) emphasise the roles of individuals within a group rather than the behaviour of the group as a whole. Yet, as has been shown above when considering the liberal/radical long-term group studied, the varying composition of a group – its cumulative 'personality' – may have a crucial influence on the behaviour of the individuals composing it. On a larger scale Walter Wink demonstrates this in his understanding of biblical powers and principalities as group personalities (Wink 1998). Furthermore, unlike my work, describing the development of appropriative modes through the life of a study group, such theories describe isolated snapshots in time.

Tuckman's description of the group stages of forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckman 1965), on the other hand, may readily be correlated with the process of formation described in my hypothetical study group, an amalgam of the real groups observed. This develops from formation through Thinking debate (storming), the development of Relating skills within a homogeneous group (norming) to an acceptance of Changing variety (performing). Thus the resonances of my grounded theory of textual appropriation, formed under very specific conditions, with many different theoretical ways of describing adult learning processes may increase confidence in its fit.

Learner-centred adult education

Turning from my typology of individuals within a learning group to how these appropriative modes fit into the larger picture of adult learning, highlighting the power balance between group leader and members, one of the seminal influences in adult education theory last century has been the work of Carl Rogers.

Rogers reverses the traditional idea of the educated teacher transmitting a set syllabus to the ignorant learner (Freire's 'banking' education), making education learner-centred. He argues (Rogers 1993) that since in our rapidly changing world subject matter is so rapidly outdated, the facilitation of change itself within a non-hierarchical community of learners, rather than the mastery of specific techniques, is now the goal of education:

Out of such a context arise true students, real learners, creative scientists and scholars, and practitioners, the kind of individuals who can live in a delicate but ever-changing balance between what is presently known and the flowing, moving, altering problems and facts of the future (Rogers 1993, 229).

The qualities Rogers sees as vital in the facilitator (previously the teacher) of such a group of learners – realness, acceptance of learners, empathy – are similar to the values he emphasises within a counselling situation:

Those attitudes that appear effective in promoting learning can be described. First of all is a transparent realness in the facilitator, a willingness to be a person, to be and live the feelings and thoughts of the moment. When this realness includes a prizing, caring, a trust and respect for the learner, the climate for learning is enhanced. When it includes a sensitive and accurate emphatic [sic: empathetic?] listening, then indeed a freeing climate, stimulative of self-initiated learning and growth, exists. The student is *trusted* to develop (Rogers 1993, 241) [author's italics].

Such attitudes – empathetic respect given by teachers to learners (or rather, by the facilitator to the *other* learners in the group), openness to development by learners – appear to be compatible respectively with a Relating and a Changing approach to biblical interpretation. However, though Rogers himself stresses the crucial nature of interactions within the group (Rogers 1993, 228), feedback from students in the essay cited (237-39) focusses solely on the difference such courses have made to them as individuals rather than how the group as a whole has been affected.

Such an outcome would be anathema to Relaters. Moreover, though he aims at

the transformation of individuals' lives, Rogers says nothing of the potential inequalities experienced by group members, who appear in his account to have no social context in terms of class, race or gender. Thus the question of power dynamics within the group, crucial for Changers, is ignored. Rogers' ideas are therefore more applicable to self-directed Thinkers.

Malcolm Knowles (Knowles 1980, 1984) has developed Rogers' ideas further into a program called andragogy, specifically focussed on the teaching of adults.

Andragogy operates on four main assumptions:

- Adults both desire and enact a tendency toward self-directedness as they mature, though they may be dependent in certain situations.
- Adults' experiences are a rich resource for learning. Adults learn more effectively through experiential techniques of education such as discussion or problem-solving.
- Adults are aware of specific learning needs generated by real life tasks or problems. Adult education programs, therefore, should be organized around 'life application' categories and sequenced according to learners' readiness to learn.
- Adults are competency-based learners in that they wish to apply newly acquired skills or knowledge to their immediate circumstances. Adults are, therefore, 'performance-centered' in their orientation to learning (Knowles 1980, 43-44).

There is much that is positive in this model. Mature Thinkers in Bible study groups, for whom the 'banking' assumption of traditional learning styles that the learner comes *tabula rasa* to study is patently absurd, value the recognition of their learning competencies. In theory the value of learning based on 'life application' categories for the same demographic group seems evident, for similar reasons. Yet in my fieldwork the choice of theme in community hermeneutics – intended to be both self-directed by the learning group, sensitive to the group's own learning needs and performance-centred, focussing on answers to the group's pressing questions – rarely lived up to andragogic expectations.

In the group where theme and answers dovetailed most closely and connections were made most readily, the participants were most culturally homogeneous in terms of gender, age and class. Their theme-related experiences therefore overlapped most significantly, maybe thus simulating the 'context-free' learners of androgogy. In most groups, however, less advantage was taken of the freedom entailed in deciding on a topic of mutual interest, rather than having a topic decided by the leader, than would be predicted by Knowles' assumptions. The themes chosen, albeit of general interest, could not be described either as burning issues requiring resolution or as matters affecting the group as an entity. Such a situation might be predicted in the case of groups formed specifically for research purposes, and therefore reliant on the leader for coherence and identity, but it also pertained in the long-term Relating group studied. There must, therefore, be a question mark over Knowles' claim that all adults – and therefore all adults involved in group Bible study – are naturally desirous of self-direction.

The most andragogic in this respect was the long-term Changing group, composed of members accustomed on a regular basis to setting the group's agenda by mutual consent without external authority. However, the high degree of self-direction allowed by split leadership, combined with a deliberately minimally directive attitude on my part, actually contributed to the breakdown in communication described above (see Chapter 7) working against the completion of the hermeneutical circle. In retrospect, this outcome can be seen as an abrogation of the responsibility for leadership on my part: a romanticisation of this group on the basis that they already knew more than I about group process and therefore required no direction.

Giving the learners near total responsibility for their learning was no more suitable than arrogating sole responsibility to myself as leader would have been.

Ironically, had I taken Freire's balancing act between directive and learner-directed education more seriously, my dealings with the group might have gone more smoothly:

Beginning with the fact that all educational practice is directive by its very nature, the question that coherent progressive educators must deal with is what do they need to do to diminish the distance between what they say and what they do so as not to allow directivity to turn into authoritarianism or manipulation. By the same token, in avoiding directivity they need to prevent losing themselves in the lack of clear limits that often leads into a laissez-faire approach (Freire 1993, 117).

Learner-centred models of adult education can, then, provide helpful insights about the nature of the learner as a subject in the learning process, entitled to respect and with some responsibility for shaping the form and content of learning. People in churches who have previously been discouraged, whether by authoritarian leadership styles or by rigid dogmatic limits, from thinking for themselves – the majority of interviewees could cite such past encounters! – can appreciate the encouraging and enabling learning environment which Rogers' ideas are intended to foster. Group members with a wealth of life experience but lacking in academic expertise may find Knowles' andragogy takes them seriously as learners.

The Relating dimension of learning, however, an essential component of my understanding of textual appropriation within local-church Bible study groups, remains largely unexplored in these models, as is the Changing dimension of welcomed diversity. They can be over-optimistic, moreover, both about learners' ability to operate autonomously and about the desirability of such autonomy once attained.

It would be inadequate, however, to remain with general adult education theorists, as though faith education were merely adult education transposed into a smaller arena. In order to bring my theory into dialogue with others touching on the same subject, the peculiar context and content of the Christian education of adults must also be taken into account.

Hindrances to Christian adult education

The first of my findings to consider in this regard is the low value placed in practice on adult education by members of local-church congregations. In spite of my years participating in local-church Bible study groups with low numbers, I had not anticipated the difficulty I would encounter in convening sufficient groups to undertake my research. The problem of group motivation was well summed up by the minister of one of the churches involved in my research:

GW: I'm speaking specifically now about this group of churches... Over the last few years we have had study, that's Bible study or Lent study, and the people who come have come out of a sense of commitment. It's a kind of obligation.... Which is why people come to a meeting. Rather than come because they're searching. Now hopefully that's not the way it is in studies in the flesh. There's still a challenge... But I definitely think that most people come because they think they have to... Rather than them coming because they feel Christian education is an important part of our responsibility.

Such a response is particularly unexpected in a Reformed church tradition, looking back to Calvin and Knox, which theoretically prizes lay educational achievement. Unhappily, however, at least anecdotally, the problem is widespread in mainstream Christian denominations. What has caused this apparent flight from learning? Here John Hull, in his critique of the current educational state of British churches, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (Hull 1991) is a helpful dialogue partner.

Hull cogently presents a picture of the 'unlearning' Christian adult. His explanation for the existence of this phenomenon is simple: adults within the churches who see their Christian life as a refuge from the problems of modernity must pay a high price:

They have stopped learning. That is the price which was paid. There was no longer anything to learn which was suitable for adult learning. So learning stopped. Learning would have been confusing. Learning would have violated the simplicity of the haven (Hull 1991, 10).

He distinguishes two types of church, differentiated by their attitudes to individualism, one characteristic trend of modernity, and with consequently different barriers to learning.

A church which rejects individualism, private judgment, independent enquiry, and consequently places a very low value upon adult Christian learning, may centre upon an emphasis on liturgy, authority, and tradition (Hull 1991, 16).

Such a congregation, according to Hull, may value ethnic solidarity and the faithful handing down of group traditions more highly than creativity. Education will be instructional and extrinsic. 'Experts' in the tradition will come in at particular times of the liturgical year, or as mission teams, but there will be little input into educational programmes from the local context of congregational members.

Since my research has largely focussed on congregations from the Reformed tradition, the congregational emphasis on formal liturgy Hull describes has not formed a significant part of my study. However, going by the discussion above on my theory's explanatory power, where conservative and liturgical Relaters played similar roles in different scenarios, it seems that Catholic and conservative Protestant Relaters may show similarities in their text-appropriative strategies, driven by the necessity of authority within a bounded church community. A recent collaboration,

Your Word is Truth: a project of Evangelicals and Catholics together demonstrates an unexpected degree of hermeneutical consensus:

Because Christ's church is the pillar and bulwark of truth, in disputes over conflicting interpretations of the word of God the church must be capable of discerning true teaching and setting it forth with clarity. This is necessary both in order to identify and reject heretical deviations from the truth of the gospel and also to provide sound instruction for passing on the faith intact to the rising generation. Evangelicals and Catholics alike are concerned with these questions – What does the Bible authoritatively teach? And how does Christ's church apply this teaching authoritatively today? (Colson and Neuhaus, 2002, 6)

In the other type of congregation Hull describes,

Corporate identity has virtually collapsed... such a congregation tends to become no longer a community, but a mere collectivity of individuals who happen to meet together in order to do together what they could with almost equal effectiveness do alone, i.e. engage in an inner worship involving the cultivation of subjective qualities of devotion (Hull 1991, 16-17).

Members of such a church, he argues, may strongly resist the idea of dialogue or discussion, in the interests of safeguarding their personal relationship with God from external distractions. Education comes from the 'teaching' sermon, handed over to the faithful from on high as a collection of facts.

This description, more typical of the liberal churches within which much of my study was carried out, has resonances with the Thinking approach to studying the Bible.

It is intriguing to note Hull's connecting this with 'inner worship involving the cultivation of subjective qualities of devotion'. Is it possible that Thinkers' experience does indeed include such characteristics, reminiscent of Schleiermacher, Harnack and other nineteenth-century liberal theologians, on such a deeply personal and interior level that it plays no part in their discussions with others? This might connect them with Walter Wink's 'functional atheist' biblical scholars, who behave in their working lives as though their understanding of God were irrelevant to study

of the biblical texts, yet in their private lives value participation in a worshipping community (Wink 1973, 38).

Such practices might also be, as more than one interviewee has testified (see for example Appendix IV), a balancing mechanism for Thinkers, supplementing a purely cerebral devotion. A third possibility is that the difference between Hull's ecclesial typology and mine should serve as a cautionary reminder that different analysts may link individual themes in a variety of ways, and will therefore generate a variety of interpretations. Further research would be required in order to address this question more fully.

In either variety of church, according to Hull, education takes the traditional form, familiar from school, if not always from Sunday school, of informational data transfer from teacher to learner. This in itself can pose problems for adults whose learning experience in childhood was not happy. Hull rejects the notion that merely informing people better is the goal of Christian education, in favour of the transformation of their personal constructs (see above):

Sometimes we tend to think that the theological education of adult Christians is a matter of making them better informed about Christian doctrine and then helping them to see or to find out for themselves what the application or the significance of Christian doctrine might be in their lives... [T]his distinction between concept and application is educationally naïve. It will not be possible for those who receive information about other people's constructs (i.e. the teaching of the church about such and such a doctrine) to relate this meaningfully to various areas of their lives unless their own construct system undergoes a change (Hull 1991, 105).

To the extent that my modes of appropriation may legitimately be compared with personal constructs, those church members whose appropriative mode matches that of the theological educator concerned *will* be able to relate the educator's teaching to their lives, using the educator's own strategies for and measures of success. Though

this educational process may operate to their own satisfaction, however, it will be less helpful to others with incongruent constructs. If the mismatch becomes too extreme the latter will end up voting with their feet.

Hull's analysis of the reasons why Christian adults may choose not to learn does not end with the learning contexts provided by different churches. The content of Christian adult education, according to him, also gives rise to peculiar difficulties in the modern, and still more in the postmodern world. He details some of the threats posed to religious believers by both objective pluralisation (the existence of many competing faith communities) and subjective pluralisation (the existence for each individual of many worlds of discourse and experience). In response, he characterises 'an awareness of relativity' as 'one of the most important outcomes of adult education, and... particularly important in the field of adult Christian education' (Hull 1991, 34).

He characterises the alternative to such awareness as 'a totalitarianism of consciousness' when 'a genuine plurality is concealed by an absolutisation of one of the plural items' (Hull 1991, 34). In its religious form such false absolutisation, whether of tradition or of doctrine, leads to such situations as a solemn warning from the pulpit not to watch the television series *Jesus: the Evidence*, because the history and implications of New Testament criticism are to be discussed:

The fear behind such a sermon is that Christ and the Christian faith might be discredited by historical enquiry and this, in turn, would bring about a change in status on the part of the Christian who, if he [sic] succumbed to this critical spirit, would no longer be a faithful disciple but a mocker. From the point of view of education, the Christian believer is here given no alternative to the life of docile, unquestioning obedience, for the life of active enquiry would induce guilt and would be blasphemous. To enquire is to doubt, to doubt is to mock. The world of television

and of scholarship may enquire and so mock, but the little flock which is the church trusts and has faith (Hull 1991, 37).

The effects of such unreflective obedience may be compounded, moreover, by the way the deepest and most important parts of our lives, including our network of meaning-bearing religious symbols, are the hardest to consider critically:

This lack of curiosity about the things to which we are most profoundly committed seems to be defensive, in the sense that it would be painful and unsettling to question the things which are the source and ground for the rest of our life and its activities... Since part of the task of Christian education is to bring faith to the level of consciousness, thus increasing the responsibility and integrity of the self, one must expect that Christian education will encounter resistance (Hull 1991, 55).

This resistance is characterised by the sensation of bafflement, which 'arises when you do know or believe that you know what you think and you become aware that what you know simply will not do in the present crisis' (Hull 1991, 57-58). When related to the field of religion, people may be baffled not only in thought but also in feeling, not knowing how to react in novel situations.

One way to deal with such bafflement, according to Hull, is to reject Christianity altogether. An alternative strategy may cause a group collectively to draw in its horns and separate itself from the outside world, hardening its ideological stance, thus sparing itself the pain of disillusionment. In this way people may avoid total bafflement, but they will also avoid further learning and development. Adults in this situation may well desire to learn, but may be put off by fear and anxiety about transgressing the tenets of the belief structure, lest they become unacceptable to the group. Others may retreat into spiritual passivity and lack of responsibility.

Arguably, the members of the conservative Relating group observed face the kind of dilemma Hull describes. Their general approach to Bible study, as described in

interviews before the group sessions began, cannot fairly be described as a lack of curiosity about the faith – they are, after all, among the few who have faithfully committed time to joint study, every week for a period of years. However, several members of the group expressed boredom with the style of past study, combined with an apparent inability to challenge that approach (see Chapter 6 above).

Bafflement was also evinced during group sessions when text and experience came into conflict, as this exchange recorded in my fieldnotes shows:

Leader: What do we make of the difference between our experience and that of the text [a question of prayer working or not]?

Group member: That it's very confusing!

It is instructive to parallel this reaction with that of the Changer delighted when a group leader honestly admitted that his experience on that very topic (see Chapter 7) did not match the content of the text.

The group's reaction of bafflement came even more prominently into focus during a comparison between two parallel Gospel passages, Matthew 10:1-16 and Luke 9:2-5, during the fourth meeting of the series to use this method of study. My notes from that session demonstrate how the conservative Relating understanding of history as integrative and uniform can block the opportunity for new insights to be generated by a historical-critical approach to the texts. They also show how the possibility of changing one's familiar understanding of a topic, even through the use of tested hermeneutical rules (this group was enthusiastic about understanding the New Testament through references to the Old) could become something to be resisted, to the point of baffled silence.

Leader: In Matthew Jesus focusses the mission on the lost sheep of Israel, not on Gentiles or Samaritans. In Luke he gives no restriction. Why?

Either Luke writing for Gentiles found that part irrelevant [leader's suggestion] or Matthew as an eyewitness had more detail [favoured by group].
Could Jesus be expanding his mission later [leader]?
No: he was focussing his disciples on one clear aim [group]
Leader: Luke's version is missing the Sodom and Gomorrah reference in Matthew.
Why might that be? [silence from group]
Because Luke's readers wouldn't understand? [silence from group]
What was the sin of Sodom? [silence from group]
From Ezekiel it is to be understood as pride and lack of hospitality [contribution from leader: total silence from group].

If the rigidity of such an approach is easy to spotlight, it should be reiterated to these Relaters' credit that in spite of bafflement they continue to try to make sense of the biblical texts, where Thinking church members have often – ironically – given up thinking about the Bible altogether. Hull describes the intermediate position between embracing and hiding from the plurality of the world as one of avoiding any thinking liable to lead to the pain of cognitive dissonance. While in some of the more sect-like churches this may be a policy decision, it is also to be found at a less conscious level within traditions which, in theory, respect Christian education. Hull notes wryly that

[i]t is curious to note how frequently congregations of middle-class professional people who maintain a high standard of intellectual competence in their daily work not only have a felt distaste for sermons which make even slight intellectual demands upon them but really do find them difficult to understand (Hull 1991, 124).

Apart from the question this inevitably provokes of the usefulness or otherwise of the sermon as a teaching method – a thesis topic in itself – this chimes in with one participant's comment, noted earlier (see Chapter 5), that she and other members of her church were stuck at a teenage level of understanding. Nor was the fear of intellectual endeavour restricted to one church, even within my small-scale investigation. Members of two other groups in positions of church leadership and responsibility (an elder, a church treasurer) had never previously studied the Bible. As reported above (Chapter 5), elders from the church where a third group was held

absented themselves from the group, because they felt that Bible study was something best left to the scholars. A competent and highly educated member of a fourth group, moreover, insisted to the end of the study series, all evidence to the contrary, that they were no theologian.

To a degree this unease with the idea of learning, manifested even before my groups began, also reflects the schooling of those group members with less experience of formal education. This is likely, given the age of most participants in Bible study groups, to have predated the move to learner-centred education and may well have been characterised by strict discipline and discouragement of learner initiative.

In such cases, *pace* Rogers and Knowles, moving the focus of education from teacher to learner is not in itself sufficient to ensure that learning will take place. In spite of my best endeavours to model empathetic facilitation and to encourage an atmosphere of safe experimentation, even Thinking – the textual appropriation strategy involving least self-disclosure, least possibility of disruptive change – was evidently experienced by committed church members, both Relaters and Thinkers, as a difficult and potentially threatening process.

Hull's diagnosis of why Christian adults in both Thinking and Relating contexts have stopped learning, then, rings depressingly true when measured against my findings.

Is there also room for Changing in his analysis? Initially his argument in favour of accepting relativism appears to resonate with the Changing delight in variety.

However, the educational remedy he suggests, grafting Fowler's and Erikson's theories of personal and faith development (see also the discussion on development religious education below) onto the learner-centred tradition of Rogers and Knowles,

emphasises an understanding of human beings focussed on the individual and the universal. Such an approach is at odds with the analysis of difference, which is basic to the Changing approach. It also holds little room for Relaters' group-orientated approach. How, then, do other approaches to adult education which is specifically Christian handle the threefold typology of learning which my theory has brought to light?

Approaches to Christian adult education

To answer this question I shall use a helpful survey of the field in which

[f]ive approaches will be surveyed: religious instruction, faith community, spiritual development, liberation, and interpretation. While these approaches are not fully parallel and certainly are not mutually exclusive, they do illustrate that different emphases suggest differing strategies for Christian education, and more important, they focus on different questions as critically significant in shaping the discipline and its practice (Seymour 1982, 16).

It must be borne in mind that the authors speak into the American educational context, and also that they are dealing with the education of children as well as adults, to which different expectations legitimately apply. However, the five approaches considered give a good idea of the range of strategies for learning and teaching being practised within Christian education for adults too. Looking specifically at the location of expertise within the study method, as I did when reviewing methods of group Bible study in Chapter 1, I shall consider each in turn, in order to appraise the degree to which each resonates with the various appropriative modes of my own theory.

Religious instruction

Religious instruction, as the name suggests, is a traditional mode of education which church members may expect from their own schooldays to encounter within Bible study groups. Sara P. Little takes 'instruction' in the religious context to involve the same relationships and skills as teaching any other subject:

It is performed by those persons in the community responsible for instruction and therefore focuses on the teacher and on teaching responsibility more than on the student... To instruct [definition taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*] means to furnish with knowledge or information; to teach; to educate; to apprise; to inform concerning a particular act or circumstance; to put in order; to form; to inform (Little 1982, 39).

According to Little, the peculiarity of specifically religious instruction is its subject matter. The teacher's responsibility is to present this subject matter for students' own judgement to operate, rather than in order to accomplish a specifically religious goal.

Religious instruction, then, is

the process of exploring the church's tradition and self-understanding in such a way that persons can understand, assess, and therefore respond to the truth of the gospel for themselves. It can always be the hope, but never the objective of the teacher that the understanding and the assessment will lead to a response that will transform the person as he or she receives the gift of faith (Little 1982, 41-42).

These definitions resonate with the understanding of several Church of Scotland ministers I interviewed concerning the teaching role of the ordained ministry (see Chapter 5). It is largely a Thinking view, as Little's tripartite division of religious instruction into understanding, deciding and believing emphasises. However, other interpretative modes also play some part within this view of religious education.

Under the heading of understanding, Little's warning of the 'self-corrupting' temptation of teachers to 'manage' the truth for their own purposes is briefly reminiscent of the Changing hermeneutic of suspicion (Little 1982, 45).

Her emphasis on the necessity of deciding leading to action: 'I would say such action might be "Here I stand," or, "This I must do." Or both' (Little 1982, 46) is also

Changing in its implications. And while for her 'believing' has a strong cognitive component, like Relaters she refuses to separate truth from faith:

The religious community witnesses to the God of truth in every aspect of its life and waits expectantly for the gift of faith. And belief is a factor in faith, either flowing from faith as 'faith seeking understanding,' or feeding into, deepening and clarifying faith (Little 1982, 47).

Little's understanding of Christian education as instruction from the teacher to the taught has only infrequently been heard in the course of my research, and only from Thinkers. Little's view of the good teacher:

One who, like the student, stands before the truth; who selects areas for investigation, and structures and processes by which, together, they can ask the question Why? (Little 1982, 49)

describes an expert who takes the burden of managing the knowledge of her subject largely upon herself. In the best-case scenario, this power is handled responsibly for the benefit of her students. Authoritative expert-to-novice teaching of this variety, however, appears regrettably infrequently in the experience of my interviewees.

As it is, religious instruction is all too easily perceived as authoritarian, especially when adults rather than children are being taught. So, as we have already noted, can the Thinking approach itself, as seen by both Relaters and Changers.

Faith community

How does Charles R. Foster define a community of faith?

It is a people whose corporate as well as personal identities are to be found in their relationship to some significant past event. Their reason for being may be traced to that event. Their response to that event shapes their character, confirms their solidarity, and defines their identity. Their unity is expressed through their

commitment to that event, and their destiny is revealed in the power of its possibilities (Foster 1982, 54).

Foster enumerates the narratives of faith which shape the Christian community, from creation through the stories of God's interaction with the people of Israel and – paradigmatically – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus:

We describe who we are in relation to the cross. We call ourselves the Body of Christ. We are Christians. Through the cross, we describe the interdependence of the human race. We speak of loving our neighbors as we have been loved – even to the point of ultimate sacrifice. We give form to the continued experience of that event through rituals and traditions. We have created institutions to make that continuity possible. And we seek to preserve its power in our lives through the use of ancient creeds and by retelling old stories. At the same time we attempt to claim the event's creative power for the present by reinterpreting it in light of new circumstances... we respond to its intent by striving for justice. We extend the compassionate concern of Jesus to the dispossessed and despised. We minister to the sick and lonely. As commitment to the Christ-event becomes the organizing center for our lives, it also becomes the focus of our personal and corporate identities (Foster 1982, 55-56).

Going from the model given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, he sees the end of faith community education to build up the body of Christ through 'nurture, instruction, interpretation, ecstatic utterance, hymn-singing, and sustenance and support'

(Foster 1982, 59). When successfully undertaken, this will enable the next generation to appropriate the founding event for themselves; will transmit specifically Christian lifestyles through the shaping of attitudes and behaviour and will also 'incorporate into its appropriation of past events the meanings emerging from our contemporary situation' (Foster 1982, 60).

This approach to religious education resonates with the Relating mode of textual appropriation where worship by the group, right relationships within the group and service in daily life beyond the group, sustained by character developed within the group, are the main ends of group study.

As previously acknowledged, a focus on ritual and church tradition has not formed a great part of my study. Foster's description of the appropriation of Christian corporate identity through liturgical ritual is applicable here only in terms of a study-group meeting begun in song and ended with prayer. However, the ability, demonstrated particularly by one group of liberal Relaters, to connect the experiences of the present community with those of the past involves similar skills of imagination and empathy.

Foster's understanding of the relationship between teacher and learner is much more fluid and mutual than is expected to be the case in religious instruction. His description of the learning process is strongly reminiscent of that in one of the strongly Relating groups (Group 3; see Chapter 6 for a description by one of the participants):

The learners organize their experience in quite personal ways. Their grasp of meanings and practices occurs in the context of their own situations. When they reveal the meanings they have appropriated from the teacher's efforts, they may well introduce the teacher to a new angle of vision on a familiar theme. This new insight may, in turn, alter the teacher's own viewpoint. In other words, in the interplay between past events and future possibilities, both teachers and learners are exposed to new ideas and insights (Foster 1982, 61).

Teachers, moreover, act as bridges between 'the past-orientated members of the community and the learners, who bring with them distinctive perceptions, experiences, and abilities which the community needs to extend its life and mission into the future' (Foster 1982, 61). In other words, traffic between the community's heritage – in this context, the Bible, with the unspoken values transmitted through community living – and its future is in both directions.

This may be where the conservative Relaters studied, whose experience is subordinated to their prior understanding of the text, are discovering an imbalance. Socialisation into the group is attained at the cost of welcoming new insights from those who come in or previously unnoticed aspects of the texts. Foster hints at the potential for over-control in such situations: 'the corporate emphasis may be easily distorted into a preference for the status quo. The emphasis upon history may deteriorate into a nostalgic fascination for a limited past' (Foster 1982, 68). Here Thinkers' analytical skills and the Changing acceptance of diversity are required to counter the possibility of a Relating group homogenising their founding event into one version of the story, from which no deviation is recognised or allowed.

Among potential limitations of this style of religious education, Foster questions the continuing relevance of a group study approach to religious education within churches:

Is it possible to make use of the corporate and historical imagery of the community of faith in a society governed by the assumptions and expectations of voluntarism? (Foster 1982, 68).

For many people churchgoing at all, let alone the additional commitment of study groups, has become intermittent rather than regular, dictated by external commitments as much as by commitment to the ecclesial community. In such a voluntarist context, how is the transmission of community identity to be sustained, even on the level of current experience? Foster contrasts the strategies chosen by leaders of voluntary and of communal societies:

Leaders in voluntary societies rarely view as important what I have called the historical sources for our corporate identity. They focus primary attention on what is consciously known, and on procedures that might create and sustain the bonds of freely chosen relationships, which also may be freely severed. Leaders concerned

with more communal social structures, on the other hand... stress the significance of those rituals, rites, and traditions which evoke the historical expression of their corporate life (Foster 1982, 69).

In the Reformed tradition, rituals and rites by which the corporate nature of the church may be communally appropriated are scarce resources. Contrariwise, free severance of association leading to schism is a distressing feature of our church history. There is all the more need, then, for Reformed churches, and for Relating study groups within them, to resist stagnation and renew their corporate identity by both treasuring the past and welcoming the future.

Spiritual development

At the other pole from religious instruction, in spiritual development the responsibility of increasing understanding is placed firmly in the hands of individual learners. In this approach to religious education, in the same tradition as Rogers, Knowles and Hull, Donald E. Miller isolates four deep-seated processes of development: awareness, intentionality, coherence and mutuality (Miller 1982, 89f).

He sees the goal of Christian education as

the maturity of persons – that persons become more aware of themselves, their communities, and their world; more intentional in making choices and in relating to others. Maturity means risking the discovery of wider and deeper levels of meaning and becoming more interactive and responsive to other persons (Miller 1982, 93).

The idea of spiritual development is based on the premise that children need to be educated in a manner suitable to their age and stage of development, spiritually as much as physically and mentally. Without difficulty, this concept can be extended to the context of adult life-stages. As Miller admits (Miller 1982, 76), and as my previous treatment of this educational approach has also indicated, developmental education focusses on the individual. The underlying models of

cognitive (Piaget 1977), moral (Kohlberg 1981), emotional (Erikson 1950) and faith (Fowler 1981) development on which it is based generally underline this emphasis, though less so in the case of Erikson. There are other countering voices, for example Gilligan's (Gilligan, 1982) understanding of moral development in women as competence in matters of relationship rather than matters of justice, Kohlberg's own standard of maturity. As his criterion of mutuality makes clear, Miller himself does not see the need to confine spiritual development to individuals (Miller 1982, 76).

Yet the individual is still the focal point:

To some extent, developmental teaching must be individualized. Whether or not activities are in a group, the teacher must be in touch with the progress of development in each individual... The one-to-one relationship is critical in the concept of development, since without it, the teacher can scarcely know a learner's stage of development (Miller 1982, 95, 96)

The role of the teacher as facilitator of learning has already been described. With Miller, focussing on specifically spiritual development, the teacher has aspects of the spiritual director or guru:

[T]he teacher has a vision of what the learner can become. The teacher's confidence and challenge become an element in the synthesis which make up the next stage of development. In this sense the teacher is a sponsor. It seems axiomatic that only a teacher who is open to the next stage of development for himself or herself can be sensitive to that openness in the learner. So the teacher must have the qualities of guide, sponsor, challenger, observer, manager, diagnostician, and model. A teacher might manage without some of these qualities, but without any of them, the person might as well give up teaching (Miller 1982, 95-96).

For several reasons, this approach to learning has found little place in my research.

While, as we have seen, in developmental education the group dimension is not totally absent, the role of the individual is key. Group study, as opposed to one-to-one tuition, is not a context for which this type of guidance is designed.

Traditionally, moreover, the Reformed tradition has looked askance at the use of

imaginative or meditative Bible study such as the Ignatian approach, though Catholic *lectio divina* may be more familiar (if not under that name) in individual study of the Bible. Yet, as several interviewees have noted, the use of stories and ritual, drama and role play in Bible study can provide a refreshing contrast to the over-verbal approach with which Reformed Christians are more familiar. One of the Changing ministers interviewed predicted an emerging shift in religious emphasis, from the 'relevant' to the 'mystical':

- TC: There's a number of things that usually come up [as themes for discussion]. But they're usually more spiritual than, if I were setting the agenda, I would tend to go for issues that I perceived to be relevant to people's daily living.
- S: Aha. Why do you think people will choose the more evidently spiritual ones, as opposed to the daily living ones?
- TC: Presumably it's more important to them. I think there's also a [change] taking place in the religious environment in this country... I think that we have moved towards making church relevant, almost like the businesses that people work in, making it understandable. I've a feeling that it's going to become much more mystical in the future... That churches are where people are actually going to react against the people in suits and ties, they're actually going to want gowns and imagery, candles and incense. I think it could very well swing in a totally different direction, and the trappings will become more hands-on. We'll see perhaps more of the majesty of God, the grandeur of God and the otherness of God will become much more important than the being like us, being a brother or sister with us, the aspect that's been portrayed.

Apart from the brief glimpse of meditative Bible study noted in Appendix IV, the data most closely approximating to this category of religious education within the groups observed concerned group prayer. However, as this interviewee notes, such intimacy within a group or between a group and its leader is not quickly built up:

- AN: When we started open prayer at P's group, she was a missionary, she was very much into prayer, [it was] very much part of her thing. I would pray with her privately, two of us together, on several occasions, and that helped me to start praying openly... And several of us really just gradually got into it. It's not a thing you can do in a short-term group, I don't think.

However much made welcome, in my fieldwork I was an outsider to the groups with whom I worked. Open prayer in my presence, especially if connected with research, might have made participants feel vulnerable. Still less could I have made any claim to lead the group in spiritual development. A group exploring community hermeneutics together over the longer term, however, might well find resonances between the imaginative skills necessary for the connection phase of the cycle and a group practice of spiritual development. Such ongoing research might also make it clearer whether a mystical mode of textual appropriation is an aspect of Thinking (as hypothesised above) or of Relating, or whether – as I suspect – it is a separate category, practised to some extent by Thinkers, Relaters and Changers alike (see Appendix IV).

Liberation

What of liberation, a theory of adult education apparently resonating so closely with the Changing model of appropriation? Here my hopes of the groups studied were highest, yet maybe my motivation was the least pure, as Allan J. Moore pointedly comments on the situation of the American church:

Even the least among us is not politically oppressed, and the abundance we take for granted transforms our understanding of the reality of poverty into a figment of our imagination. We are undoubtedly motivated in part by our guilt for having so much and in part by our partial awareness that the institutions we represent have contributed directly, as well as indirectly, to the oppression experienced so intensely by the people of the Third World (Moore 1982, 103).

Such a comment assumes that people in American churches are not themselves poor or oppressed, even by the relative standards of their own society; in general, for my groups on this side of the Atlantic, such an assumption would be warranted. One group was located in a traditionally working-class community, which undoubtedly

knew financial hardship, but group members, coming largely from the church leadership, had skills and standing in their community and expressed poverty only in their lack of biblical knowledge.

Stories of unemployment and financial hardship did surface in another, middle-class group, situated in a leafy suburb – though, of course, hardship is always relative.

This group shared matters of women's experience in a manner consonant with a feminist consciousness-raising group. Yet the group was a place in which to share experience, not to change it. Moreover, as I have already noted, though personal matters were shared comparatively freely, direct questioning over financial affairs, let alone any attempt at economic analysis of the situation, would also have been taboo. Interestingly, Beverley Harrison believes that this may in part be a problem of inadequate Relating:

My work with local church people has taught me that their resistance to examining these issues [socio-economic] has less to do with political ideology and identification than with their mistrust of the church as the sort of community in which such revelation may occur... [M]y work with congregations has revealed that sex and money are taboo subjects in the parish because nearly everyone feels vulnerable to them. Very few believe that as experienced in their congregation, Christian love includes attention to people's suffering in these areas. In order to overcome this mistrust, the development of a critical consciousness of class issues requires participation and mutuality at all levels of congregational life (Harrison 1988, 148).

How does the appropriative mode of Changing match up with Moore's understanding of liberation? I am certainly confirmed by Moore's approach in my decision to classify Christian service *per se* more as a Relating than as a Changing function. It is one, moreover, to which Moore ascribes little value:

There is possibly nothing more empty today than the works of the social reformer or the good deeds of the well-intentioned Christian. It is this desire to do something for someone else or to solve the problems of others that has been the characteristic response of liberal Christian education. We look on at a distance (a Sunday morning

discussion group) and make decisions about what will make life better for someone else... Liberation means escape from a system where someone *does something for you*. The fundamental idea is that *you learn to help yourself* (Moore 1982, 107, 108) [author's emphasis].

Following Segundo, Moore suggests that 'a theology of liberation begins not with oppression *out there* somewhere, but with the new and decisive questions which arise out of the present reality (social context) in which *we find ourselves*' (Moore 1982, 109, author's emphasis). Orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy should be our concern:

The key phrase is theological praxis, or the actual participation in the ongoing struggle for faith. The Bible is not a book to know in abstraction, but is the call of oppressed people to participate in the liberating acts of God the Liberator. Commitment is not to words, but to deeds that are specific and concrete (Moore 1982, 116).

Of course, such an identification with the oppressed people of the Bible, liberated by God, relies on the existence of a community with an identity of its own, whose members can in turn identify with the situation of the biblical communities.

As I have noted, and as Moore also testifies, this cannot be taken for granted:

The preoccupation of Christian education with the individual has led to a neglect of those social or collective values and behaviors that become the shared way of life for a group of persons. Even among Roman Catholics, formation is directed more toward the spiritual growth of the individual than toward the development of a total group of people who have a common or shared approach to the world (Moore 1982, 112).

The Thinking groups were hampered from the beginning in this respect. However, even the long-term Relating group I studied did not appear to have liberative activities as a priority. Why might this be? Moore thinks that

As cultural Christians, it has become easier for us to be 'of the world' and to choose secularized values that make for social respectability, than to stand over against the world... The church functions in established society primarily as a promoter of social harmony, and its basic gestures in the world serve the welfare of the privileged rather than of the oppressed (Moore 1982, 113).

Harrison agrees:

The ability to develop a critical class consciousness is not much affected by a congregation's theological perspective. Self-identified liberal congregations and clergy usually have a strong, historically conditioned resistance to accepting struggle and conflict in the community, and far more powerful mechanisms operate within such congregations to identify with the dominant cultural ethos. The social amnesia characteristic of 'middle-stratum-identified' groups is especially prominent in liberal churches because job mobility and education obscure connections with family roots. Conservative churches are not much different (Harrison 1988, 148).

Ironically, then, both groups in dialogue with the outside world and groups which see themselves as separated from it have internalised its values and, without realising it, serve the secular status quo. But is it possible to do anything else, given our social setting? Moore's point holds good for the British context too:

For most of us, the goal is the reform of the established social structures. Seldom do we within the American scene envision the total destruction of the social system for the sake of political freedom and the economic survival of others. For Freire, the humanization of life requires radical new political structures; for us, it means new psychological structures and some basic, but not radical, changes in our society (Moore 1982, 107-108).

It comes as little surprise, then, that instead of describing a current mode of education which is already liberative, Moore's call is a more prescriptive one: to put our own house in order, rather than borrowing 'liberative' insights and actions from people in other contexts. Maybe it is for this reason that he does not sketch out, as the proponents of the other approaches do, defining characteristics of teacher and taught.

Yet my observation of Changing participants in several groups does not lead to a counsel of despair: that, shackled to our prosperity, we cannot change. Instead, I would argue that choosing to work *with* rather than *for* others, with the aim of changing even small aspects of the society we share, is the beginning of liberating

ourselves. Assuming for the sake of argument that such a choice is feasible, how does Moore think it may be done?

Educationally, this requires a commitment to become active in the transformation of the old order. Such transformation begins with oneself, by participation in the changes required by new order. Persons learn by acting critically toward the old order and by envisioning the new order toward which they move (Moore 1982, 121).

Acting critically – in other words, Changing – thus requires the analytical skills of Thinking as well as the community context of Relating. Within the boundaries of its own context, I would argue that the long-term Changing group I observed is indeed exploring what liberative education may be.

Interpretation

Jack L. Seymour and Carol A. Wehrheim begin their analysis of interpretative education by considering the dilemma with which all my interviewees, offered the cycle of community hermeneutics as a model for their group study of the Bible, have been faced:

Does Christian education begin with biblical understandings, or with life experience? Some have argued that knowledge of the Bible is the only proper starting point and that Christian education becomes an exploration of the content of the biblical faith. Others have argued that life experience is the proper starting point and have concluded that Christian faith must grow out of life and be meaningful to life (Seymour and Wehrheim 1982, 123).

A spectrum could be drawn from Changers and liberal Relaters on the left to conservative Relaters and Thinkers on the right. The former consider life experience to be the proper starting point; the latter, knowledge of the Bible. Which solution is correct? As Seymour and Wehrheim argue, interpretative educationalists would answer: Both:

It is the thesis of this article that the connecting of life and faith is the primary task of Christian education. Its agenda is not Bible only, or life only, but both. The task of Christian education is to engage the faith-story and the experience of living into a dialogical relationship from which meaning for living emerges (Seymour and Wehrheim 1982, 124).

They suggest that this may be done using the schema of Charles Winkist (see Winkist 1980):

For Winkist, the task of the ministry of interpretation is fourfold: (1) to accept the experience of another; (2) to invite that experience into dialogue with the story of the faith; (3) to mediate the meaning present in Christian stories, symbols, and rituals; and (4) to imagine with another the action demanded as that experience is now 're-meant,' re-symbolized and re-told through the power of the Christian faith (Seymour and Wehrheim 1982, 131).

As in the other modes of interpretation, teacher and taught have a specific relationship:

While the teacher is clearly someone who knows something of the way, he or she travels with the learner, rather than standing ahead, beckoning, as someone who has already completed the journey; or behind, pushing the learner on, as someone who does not need to go on this journey. The teacher risks participation in a mutual journey with the learner and by so doing, acts as model (Seymour and Weyrheim 1982, 131-32).

'[T]he power of creative imagination' is highlighted as the strategy used by the teacher to 'recall the story of the faith and to help the student make the connections' (Seymour and Weyrheim 1982, 132). She or he needs four abilities to be able to do this. First is a willingness to hazard one's own reflections and interpretations, which must be open to change. Second comes a willingness to examine one's own presuppositions and assumptions. Third is the encouragement of students to do their own reflection and interpretation: 'Questions are asked to promote searching and discussion rather than to provide a format for giving correct answers' (Seymour and Weyrheim 1982, 132). Fourth comes the necessity, educational

as well as theological, to accept the lives and experiences of the students beyond the group as valid:

Frequently it is necessary for a group of learners to participate in a common experience, reflecting and interpreting together, and thereby enriching for all the quality of both the interpretation and the experience. If, however, the reflection and interpretation does not at some point touch the everyday lives of the learners, both the experience and the faith-story will remain in once-a-week or done-at-church memories (Seymour and Weyrheim 1982, 134).

The learners' position in interpretative education is that of pilgrims on a journey: the insights of the individual journey are important, but so is the company they keep.

The community of faith can become a setting where persons share their own experiences, their insights, their concern for one another, and their attempts to respond faithfully to God's ongoing revelation within life. The church itself is a company of pilgrims in search of meaning and vocation (Seymour and Weyrheim 1982, 135).

How do my modes of textual appropriation resonate with this method of study?

Here the authors' comments on the range of hermeneutical skills required of the interpretative teacher are apposite. Using the classification of Raimundo Panikkar (Panikkar 1979), they divide these into three. Morphological hermeneutics is 'the explanation of life given by the elders to the young' (Seymour and Wehrheim 1982, 128) – the introduction and proclamation of Christian cultural meanings to those new to the faith: a prime mode for Relaters.

Diachronical hermeneutics is the historical-critical analysis of the texts in their original temporal and spatial context. Interestingly, this is the first mention within this survey of Christian education of the use of historical-critical analysis. It is a task for which Thinkers are well adapted, though the authors point out – as my study has also established – that the process of connection back to the present is not easily made:

Skills required for diachronical hermeneutics are primarily those of textual criticism and exegesis. Certainly the first task is to uncover the context of the original text and to attempt to discuss the meaning it had in its time. Historical critical tools are extremely useful. Yet the subsequent connection of the meaning of a past text to the present is not easily done, and here is where historical analysis has been found to be limited. Merely to know what an object meant in its own time does not insure that it can be connected to the present. Creative play of the imagination is necessary for such connections (Seymour and Wehrheim 1982, 136).

Diatropical hermeneutics, the third mode, is 'the attempt to understand another culture from its own perspective' (Seymour and Wehrheim 1982, 128). Rather than Gadamer's attempted fusion of horizons (see Chapter 3), it is the attempt to participate in the understanding of others in full recognition of their difference from oneself. The authors describe it as the most difficult interpretative mode to accomplish:

Listening is of crucial significance. One must listen to an experience in the life of the other, mutually engage in dialogue about the self-understandings [sic] and seek to understand the new truth that emerges from this encounter. Both trust and a willingness to risk are essential for this process; it requires ultimate faith in one's own perspective as well as a tentative hold on that perspective. One must trust that the truth to which his or her faith points will in fact be illumined more carefully by the mutual dialogue, even though the some of the words and symbols used to express that truth will be challenged and found wanting (Seymour and Wehrheim 1982, 136).

This is the Changing hermeneutic at its best: one which accepts the other's otherness and allows oneself to be changed by the encounter.

It seems, then, that leader and members of groups studying in the interpretative tradition are required to operate in all three modes of appropriation. In this regard it is a much more complex educational strategy than the others studied. However, over more than a decade it has comprehensively been put into practice by Thomas H. Groome, the last educationalist to whom I briefly turn in this chapter.

I shall not examine Groome's teaching methodology, shared praxis (Groome 1980, 208ff), which has been developed within the context of religious education in schools rather than of adults in local churches, but merely observe its similarities with community hermeneutics. I shall, however, in concluding this chapter, draw attention to the three dimensions of faith which he isolates as necessary for religious education: faith as believing, as trusting and as doing (Groome 1980, 57-66). Here once more my categories of Thinking, Relating and Changing respectively may be discerned; once again my grounded theory of lay biblical interpretation finds confirmation in practice as well as in theory. It is time to enter a dialogue with academic hermeneutical methodologies.

9. The results: lay and academic hermeneutics in dialogue

In this chapter I return to an updated version of my original question. No longer needing to ask, Can lay interpreters profit from historical-critical methods? – evidently, through the vehicle of community hermeneutics, the vast majority of my interviewees could and did – I focus in this chapter on *how* they did it: the hermeneutical strategies through which such methods can be profitable for members of local-church study groups.

Having argued that lay study of the Bible can validly be labelled as hermeneutics, this dialogue begins with a comparison between the three appropriative modes of my theory and the three academic hermeneutical approaches described in Chapter 1. Thinking, Relating and Changing hermeneutics are considered in turn in the light of historical-critical, literary and liberationist academic approaches respectively. Focussing on their uses of history/story and personal experience as hermeneutical tools, I consider how lay interpreters preferring each of these modes make use of historical-critical methods of Bible study, and how academic interpreters might profit from the approaches of their lay colleagues.

Lay and academic interpretation compared

In the course of my fieldwork analysis, I realised that my text-appropriative modes, generated through the use of grounded theory, display direct parallels with the three hermeneutical approaches originally found in my survey of the literature. Thus Thinking has links with historical-critical study, Relating with literary hermeneutics and Changing with liberationist approaches. Viewing such convenient results

through the hermeneutic of suspicion, it is hard not to hypothesise a deliberate decision on my part to interpret the data in this way. Such, however, was not the case, at least consciously; a contention substantiated by the large measure of agreement between the lay appropriative modes discerned and ways of describing adult learners already noted in the previous chapter. Unexpectedly, it seems that 'trained' and 'ordinary' readers (using West's terminology, see Chapter 1) may not be so different in their modes of textual appropriation. Is such a parallel, however, not ascribing too great a hermeneutical significance to local-church Bible study?

Possibilities of misinterpretation are inherent in any interpretation of the Gospels, since all human interpreters, whether academics or local church members, are limited and fallible. Appendix I focusses on such situations within my fieldwork and their significance for my grounded theory. From the academic point of view, however, allowing 'ordinary' readers to have a voice in biblical interpretation may appear particularly fraught with interpretative danger. Gadamer warns,

All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought... (Gadamer 1979, 236).

Of course, the judgment that a particular response is nothing but 'arbitrary fancies' will depend to a considerable extent on one's own frame of reference. David Tracy has a warning aimed specifically at those of an academic bent:

Beyond the questions of the sexism, racism, classism, and anti-Semitism in the Christian classics and their history of effects upon all interpretations, lies a further disturbing question: is there yet another illusion systemically operative in much theological discourse – the belief, rarely expressed, but often acted upon, that only a learned elite can read these texts properly? For these texts are 'our' property. All who wish to enter the discussion should leave the margins and come to the centers to receive the proper credentials (Tracy 1987, 104).

If Tracy's warning is to be taken seriously, what is beyond the academic pale should not *ipso facto* be dismissed. Moreover, it is a Christian commonplace from Jesus and Paul onwards (see for example Matthew 11:25, 1 Corinthians 1:17-31) that in a church context the greatest wisdom is not necessarily to be found in those holding the most impressive qualifications.

Within my fieldwork, I encountered instances of 'ordinary' readers making historical-critical interpretative points that had been hidden from my supposedly 'trained' eyes by the very training which should have enabled such interpretation. In one telling example, a group was studying the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel: the study transcript is verbatim.

S: [These are f]amiliar words, and I can tell us now to stop looking for parallels, because there aren't any parallels. These are verses that in this form only appear in Matthew, though the other Gospels obviously do have endings... So this week, we're confining ourselves to looking at this passage in the context of Matthew, to try to see what's said, why it's put at this point, how Matthew's own viewpoint is brought out...

WT: [T]here is a parallel in Mark... Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature... Chapter 16. And again, he's appearing to the Eleven. I only went there because, I can't remember whether I was told it was the end of Matthew or the end of Mark they think was an afterthought put in afterwards.

S: It's the end of Mark.

WT: It's the end of Mark. So, that, maybe, is where that parallel belongs.

Both the participant concerned and I were aware of the secondary status 'they' – expert biblical scholars – give to the last verses of Mark's Gospel. As a result of academic socialisation, I had discounted Mark 16:15 as secondary material and therefore less suitable for study purposes. Yet the 'ordinary' reader, unhampered by the unspoken evaluation which underlies academic historical-critical study as much as any other mode of interpretation, could note it as an appropriate study parallel to Matthew 28:18-20.

It could be argued that this is the mistake of a tyro academician. Yet as it demonstrates, 'ordinary' readers of the Bible have a legitimate part to play in hermeneutical discussion within the church, highlighting the unspoken interpretative regulations obtaining within the Academy. Indeed, they have one advantage over trained readers in this process: the context within which their interpretation takes place is more easily discerned than the apparently but not actually neutral location of the Academy. As Gerald West comments on the process of contextual Bible study (see Chapter 1), using a move congruent with Boff's 'correspondence of relationships' hermeneutic (again, see Chapter 1):

A careful and systematic study of the Bible and a careful and systematic analysis of our context enables us to appropriate the Bible more carefully because we are able to identify both the similarities and differences between the Bible and its contexts, on the one hand, and ourselves and our contexts, on the other. Appropriation is perhaps the most important part of the contextual Bible study process, but it is a complex exercise which requires critical reflection (West 1993, 23).

Focussing on the use of history and/or personal experience as hermeneutical tools, I shall therefore parallel the modes of appropriation to be found in my grounded theory with the academic hermeneutical approaches surveyed in Chapter 1, to illuminate my interviewees' uses of historical-critical methods in appropriating the biblical texts. Remembering, however, the wide semantic field of the word 'history' delineated in Chapter 2, this will be preceded by a brief excursus on the understandings of the word I came across in my fieldwork.

Interviewees' use of 'history'

Two major uses of the word 'history' by my interviewees should be distinguished: history as background – the socio-political, religious and cultural context of the times – and history applied to the foregrounded events of the life of Jesus, in Ranke's sense

of 'what actually happened'. Picking up on the distinction made in Chapter 2, these interests may be categorised respectively as critical and speculative, teleological history. Critical 'background' history may be revised in order to increase understanding of New Testament times, with few implications for faith. Events in Jesus' life, on the other hand, particularly around his birth and death, have a teleological significance for those of his followers for whom 'what actually happened' is crucial.

History as background may be further subdivided into reference to the time of Jesus and to the earlier Jewish background found in the Hebrew Bible:

NG: I think it's enlightening to read the Gospel, or a Gospel passage, with the historical background in mind. And by historical I mean two things: the local history of the time of Christ, and also the Jewish history which informs many of the teachings and the position of Christ.

While this view of the latter sees intertextuality as critical history, adding to one's knowledge of the historical background of the times, reference made in the Gospels to the Hebrew Bible also has teleological aspects, in that such reference can imply continuity with the ongoing, eschatological story of God's purposes.

With these distinctions in mind, the dialogue of lay and academic uses of historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation may proceed by considering the first mode outlined in my grounded theory of lay appropriation of the biblical texts: Thinking.

Thinking hermeneutics

In the local-church context, practitioners of the Thinking approach, who primarily seek new understanding from study of the biblical texts, require less justification in

their study than do those whose interest lies either in relationship formation or in changing society. They therefore tend to think less about their reasons for doing so. As my survey in Chapter 1 shows, historical-critical practitioners also tend to be methodologically unreflective. To what extent, then, can academic historical-critical approaches throw light on the uses of history and/or experience by Thinkers as hermeneutical tools? As one would expect for people whose mode is Thinking, the following discussion is weighted towards theory.

History as background, story as message

Early in my fieldwork I was alerted, by initial interviews with members of the two largely Thinking pilot groups, to the very *insignificant* part played in the Thinking worldview by Ranke's view of history as 'what actually happened'. When I asked what my Thinking interviewees hoped to gain from Bible study, and sought criteria for good or bad study, though more understanding was sought, the theme of history was conspicuous by its absence. This apparent disinterest contrasted strongly with the attitude of the conservative Relating group (see below), for whom the significance of history in Ranke's sense, particularly when connected with Jesus' resurrection, appeared to be a marker of theological identity.

The following interview extract illustrates the difficulty faced by both Thinkers and liberal Relaters (see below) in treating the Gospels as written history:

- S: When you're reading the Gospels in particular, then, do you think of them more in terms of the history aspect of what actually happened, or more in terms of the story?
- WO: If by the history aspect you mean, do I believe that everything that's written in the Bible happened as in black and white: this is what happened, no. I don't believe that. But it was put in there for a reason... And it may not be

historical fact... There's not very much history in the Bible that says, This happened then, is there?

S: I suppose you've got things like at the beginning of Luke, this happened in the reign of, in the procuratorship of...

WO: Yes, but there's not an awful lot there that... is bona fide history. I mean, it doesn't say Jesus was born on this day... did this and that.... He was taken to the Temple at twelve or something, and other than that, that's the first time you've heard of him since he was born... And presumably things happened in the meantime, then you don't hear anything until he starts his ministry at thirty, whenever it was. So you know, it's not... an historical document as such.

This confirms Watson's warning that for some people – and here Christian people must be included – a historical approach to the Gospels 'seems to raise greater problems than the problem it attempts to solve' (Watson 1997, 50).

In subsequent interviews, when I introduced an opposition of the terms 'history' and 'story' as ways of understanding the Gospels, Thinkers frequently chose a mixed interpretative strategy: history understood as background and story understood as narrative conveying universal truths. On the one hand, Thinkers see history understood as the background to biblical times – critical history – as a crucial part of studying the Bible, like any other ancient text. On the other hand, their difficulties with literal understandings of miracle and revelation make them stress the meaning within the Gospel narratives over their historical aspect:

S: When you're reading the Gospels specifically, do you tend to think of them more in the way of history, or more in the way of story?

SW: Well, I tend to look at them as they've been written by people who tried to put over a story at a point in time when it happened, the best way they could. So they, at that point [of] time in history, put it down the best way they could to try to put the meaning, the message over.

Thinkers' understanding of the Gospels as story used to convey truth recalls

Troeltsch's desired endpoint of historical criticism (see Chapter 2): that faith would eventually concentrate on the personality of Jesus to the exclusion of the knottier

questions of history 'as it really was'. It also resonates with Troeltsch's lesser-known fourth interpretative criterion, subjectivity – to be added to criticism, analogy and correlation – that a consensus on correct interpretation could be based on the essential uniformity of human nature. The same cannot necessarily be said, however, for their view of human understanding. A sophisticated view of the spectrum between history and myth and the twenty-first century perspective on them makes some Thinkers consider that:

TT: [t]he way people wrote history at the time the New Testament was written, the difference between fact and fiction was not as clear-cut as it is for us... it was more important to make the point than necessarily to get the historical detail down in the sort of accuracy that we would expect in our twenty-first-century world in our extraordinary need to know fact.

Such a blurring of the fact/fiction divide may be compared with Watson's strategy of 'narrated history' (Watson 1997, 54), itself derived from Ricoeur's understanding of the undivided spectrum of narrative from fiction to history. Yet Thinkers' view of history is also reminiscent of Ricoeur's second category of understanding the past: as Other than us. The more information one has on the background of these very different times and cultures, the less danger there is of misinterpreting the texts.

History as lecture or free-flowing debate

Such 'background' history is a field of enquiry which historical-critical study, especially the more recent sociological varieties (for example Meeks 1983 or Theissen 1987), is eminently suited to illuminate. However, as one of my ministerial informants has already commented (see Chapter 1), information on such matters as the economic conditions pertaining in first-century Palestine cannot be read from the biblical texts alone, but must be supplemented by extrabiblical evidence, whether

textual or archaeological. Here 'ordinary' readers, unless they can draw on their own knowledge or research skills, may become over-reliant on the input of a trained reader. Those Thinkers who operate as such by default are particularly susceptible, as the following close study of two Gospel parallels, in the first meeting of a group with less background in formal education, demonstrates. Italics show where the leader – who is meant to be asking the questions – is also answering them.

Passages: Mark 12:13-17/Luke 20:20-26

Leader: What are the differences?

Group: Mark: to trap Jesus; Luke: to hand him over to authorities. But in Mark in previous verse 'they' (authorities) tried to arrest him – same thing.

[But which authorities? Jewish or Roman? I should have asked this]

Group: Mark: 'Herodians and Pharisees' v Luke 'his enemies'.

Leader: Mark spells exact enemies out, Luke doesn't – why would that be? [Pause] *Maybe Mark's church is closer to the trouble than Luke's church, which has less trouble with the Roman authorities?*

Group: Is it also further away from trouble with Jewish authorities?

Leader: *Herodians/Pharisees are odd bedfellows but this is only interesting for Jewish Christians in Mark, not Gentiles in Luke who don't care either way.* Back to the authority of the governor, in Luke not Mark: what would that say about how they dealt with Romans? *Maybe Luke's church defers more than Mark's does?*

[Not much enthusiasm for idea. I'm not hearing what they're saying but imposing my own agenda]

Leader: What are other differences?

Group: Luke: Jesus says, show me a silver coin, whose face is on it/Mark: Jesus saw it was a trick and said, Why are you trying to trap me? In Mark Jesus is more aggressive than in Luke, confrontational?

Leader: Why might Mark's Jesus be less pacifist?

Group: Mark: private meeting between Jesus/others; Luke public meeting, different presentations of his opinion? [Pause]

Leader: *Graven images usually understood as to be worshipped – not general pictures of sovereign on coin/stamp. Now, that doesn't have implications, but especially because Roman emperor was to be worshipped then it did.*

Group: Would a photograph break the second commandment?

Leader: Presumably! *But the context of use is crucial – the snag is worship of the emperor, which is idolatry. Ultra-conservative Jews wanted to be really safe from breaking the commandment by not handling coins – Jesus wasn't, but nor were his questioners. Or Jesus could mean that there was no sovereignty in the coin – that fits in with the punchline to give God what's God's. For us, the question is: what is the emperor's, what is God's? As well as Luke being politically more accommodating, Mark's Gospel was written first so Jesus' humanity is more emphasised.*

[Leader apologises for lecture mode!]

However, given practice and confidence in community hermeneutics, most Thinking group members found historical-critical methods of studying texts in parallel and in context stimulating (see Chapter 5). Gospel parallels of the pericope concerning Jesus' preaching in Nazareth proved particularly fruitful as a springboard for close study. This began from the discovery that, though conflict in Nazareth is recorded in all three synoptic Gospels, reasons for this beyond familiarity breeding contempt – the text and content of Jesus' sermon – are given only in Luke's Gospel.

It is instructive to compare this summary of a Thinking group's use of community hermeneutics to study these texts with a summary quoted below of Relaters studying the same passages. Note that Thinkers tend to instance as 'experience' larger as well as personal themes, are not put off their stride by unanswered questions or ideas unconnected with previous topics, and do not seek resolution to their study:

Experience (theme: transformation)

Transformation as global v personal; increased recycling; students boycotting South African sport; church members involved in local politics; Jubilee 2000; being a known Christian in a work context; church made more participatory; church unions but fewer members.

Texts: Matthew 13:53-58/Mark 6:1-6a/Luke 4:16-30

Parallels: Luke much longer, has Isaiah passage and Elijah/Elisha sermon, demonstrates Luke's mission to Gentiles beyond Jewish community. Jewish reaction: intention to stone him to death (the ban) for blasphemy. Significance of Isaiah passage: promise of restoration never really happened then, picked up in Jesus? Odd circumstance: central message 'A prophet is without honour in his own country' in all four Gospels: in John parallel, Jesus says it of himself, but surrounding material is honour in Cana, honour at Capernaum, no mention of Nazareth at all – why did John edit the story out? No solution found! But why does Luke have more detail? Did they have a lectionary then, or did he just choose what to read from the scroll? Maybe Luke is giving an orderly account of Jesus' manifesto, for the benefit of his hearers. It also highlights that there was already opposition to what Jesus said. He could have stayed in mainstream Judaism but chose to focus on the outsider. Manifesto idea underlined by chronology: this happens right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry for Luke, in the middle of the story for the others. Luke constructed his story for an educated readership, regardless of what actually happened.

Reflecting

When you're campaigning to change something, you tailor your message to your audience, as the Gospel writers wrote differently. A prophet being without honour in his own country is like being the only person at playgroup who washes their baby's nappies! Choosing to be out of step with society: if you portray going to church meetings as a bore, that will reflect on church to those you work with. Speed of transformation significant; it took Jesus thirty years to be ready to launch his manifesto; some people will take years to commit themselves to Christianity. Would it work today using the authority of Scripture to do something, as Jesus does with the stories of Elijah and Elisha? Today we don't know the Bible as well as previous generations. Muslims are better educated in their religion than Christians. Jubilee 2000, anti-racism campaigns connect with Jesus' manifesto. Can work together with people outside the churches; we don't have monopoly on transformation. Volunteering in the hospital shop is working for God as much as coming to church. When a church member was saved from deportation as an immigrant, it was a non-Christian MSP who stopped it. Do churches see it that way?

Experience irrelevant

Thinkers, then, find the approaches of historical-critical scholars congenial to their mode of textual appropriation. This congruence of academic and lay hermeneutical approaches is also underlined by the mutual disinterest of Thinkers and historical-critical scholars in experience-based interpretation. From both points of view, a whole session spent discussing the text would be a better use of time than sharing personal experience on the topic concerned. For Thinkers, this may in part be attributed to their theological worldview, which finds the concept of God's direct action in the world uncongenial, and in part to reluctance to expose their personal lives to group scrutiny.

Thinkers' use of historical-critical methods

The most homogeneous Thinking group studied (quoted above), one of my pilot groups, contained a high proportion of trained theologians who have achieved a *modus vivendi* between their academic training in historical-critical methods and their faith, but may not have been encouraged to integrate the two. Though they may

be members of Bible study groups, such people will not be in the majority in local churches. Academically trained Thinkers in my fieldwork with no previous theological background, however, also found historical-critical methods engaging. These may be likened to undergraduate students, learning a range of new methods of interpretation to find out which may be most useful.

- S: And the way of looking at the parallels of the stories, and the context of the stories, do you think, when you read the Bible now you'll be asking that sort of question?
- SW: Yeah, definitely. I'll be looking at it from that viewpoint... It triggers the thought: are there other ways of doing it as well? Which we're not really versed in? It's certainly something worth exploring. But this, the method that you're using, is well worth working with and using in the future.

In the longer term, given increased confidence, those Thinkers with less academic backgrounds who start out believing that study is always and necessarily in this mode may find other modes of textual appropriation equally or more congenial. More fieldwork would be required to test this hypothesis.

Dialogue with the Academy

How may historical-critical interpreters with a commitment to the Christian faith community benefit from this comparison with their Thinking counterparts? On the one hand, the satisfaction they derive from the exchange of new ideas may be enriched by insights from other modes of biblical interpretation. On the other hand, practitioners of historical-critical methods who are becoming disenchanted by the lack of assured results in their field can refresh their confidence in this mode of study by sharing it with their co-religionists in local churches.

Relating hermeneutics

Relating local-church groups can draw with advantage on literary hermeneutical approaches. As these are based on interpreters' understanding of story and character, participants may legitimately express their points of view on an even footing with each other and the leader, allowing for Relating mutuality. For Relaters, as for some literary interpreters, the community of the church plays an overtly significant role in the process of interpretation. Moreover, theoretically engagement with the narrative is intended to have an effect on the reader's character, so looking for such an effect in practice works with the methodological grain. As one might expect from Relaters, the following discussion focusses less on theory than on the underlying values: when it comes to the uses of history and personal experience as interpretative tools, there is a parting of the ways between more liberal and more conservative Relaters.

Conservative Relaters

Gadamer's understanding of textual meaning handed down from the first Christians to their contemporary descendents is congruent with the approach of the conservative Relating group I observed – though, unlike Gadamer, they would be unlikely to label this as 'tradition', a term commonly associated with more Catholic churches.

The following comment demonstrates this understanding, once yet another meaning of 'history' had been put aside:

- S: Focussing in on the Gospels, then, specifically: would you say you think of them more in their history aspect, or more in their story aspect?
- IG: [pause] I think – I'm slightly, I'm not quite sure what you, why you're making a division between history and story, but I think, probably, more in their story, because they are relevant, they're not – I suppose one learns from history, so...
- S: Are you thinking of history as –
- IG: Past

S: Something dead and done and over?

IG: Yes. Yes. But it isn't, actually. It's something that teaches you by experience. History is the disciples' experience of Jesus. History is how these Gospels were written down, what they wanted to pass on to us.

'How it actually was' passed on

Conservative Relaters' biblical interpretation is moulded by a particular theological tradition, through which the group finds a coherent identity: it is significant that, in terms of both theology and textual appropriative strategies, this long-standing group was by far the most homogeneous of any I observed. Within this tradition, history is viewed as a discipline through which, by careful compilation of all available textual data, the most accurate version of 'how it actually was' can be discovered. Since their worldview accepts the literal nature of God's action described in the Gospels, there is no difficulty in classifying the texts into a historical (in Ranke's sense) genre. Indeed, this is theologically necessary, because the Gospels are seen as teleological history, describing patterns of living on which humanity now should be modelled.

Here conservative Relaters are more in accord with some narrativists than others; agreeing with Stroup, for example, about the nature of the truth-claims made in the texts, they would adjudge Frei's bracketing of the question by labelling the texts 'history-like' as unsatisfactory.

DA: [I]f the Gospels were not historical, if our faith was not based on history, then you would feel, well, it's invention, it's just a myth... And... I don't think I could base my faith on that.

The group observed focussed on the one correct way to understand the texts, represented by the conservative study notes to which the group had ceded teaching authority. In a similar way, those literary interpreters who do not perform detailed textual exegesis (for example Loughlin 1996) can refer without qualification to

the Christian story, at the heart of which they place *the* narrative – presumably conflated from the four Gospels – of Jesus' death and resurrection. This almost positivistic view of doctrine is like the emphasis on salvation history as the only interpretative option of which Goldingay complains (see Chapter 2); the possibility of using other Christian metastories – for example, that of God as creator, or as liberator – is ignored. In Ricoeur's terms, this is the past understood as Same (see above Chapter 3) – or rather, our lives understood as the same as the past. Given the conservative Relating distinction between world and church, however, this is based on the unity of Christian doctrine rather than the universality of human nature.

Paradoxically, in spite of their emphasis on the Gospels as history, my conservative Relating interviewees displayed little interest in finding out about 'how it actually was' in the time of Jesus. According to the evangelical scholar Chris Sugden, this is not an unfamiliar position for conservative Christianity in the West:

[T]here is a fascinating contradiction in Western evangelical Christology. It leaps to defend orthodoxy against any questions about the historical accuracy of the gospel records or the historicity of the virginal conception or the resurrection. But it places very little importance on the actual three year ministry of Jesus in Palestine (Sugden 1997, 233).

In spite of their spirited defence of historical accuracy, their approach to the Gospels accorded more closely with that of Frei and Lindbeck: the Christian story interprets the world, so God's presence in the story is valorised over that in the world, whether historical or experiential.

Gospel history as literary texts

The more literary side of historical criticism, however, was more congenial to them. Group members, far from literalist, were happy to make a historical-critical

distinction within the Gospels between the fictional genre of parable and the historical genre of narrative. Study of the text in context also had value:

SG: Initially I wondered about the relevance of putting it in context, because the Gospels were not necessarily remembered in chronological order. I never before thought the context was meant to have a bearing on any particular story, but I could see something following on from something else, though not necessarily the order of its happening.

One aspect of history as background, intertextual links between the Gospel studied and the Hebrew Bible, was also highlighted in feedback as useful. This has already been noted (see Chapter 2) as capable of sustaining a speculative as well as a critical understanding of history, when understood as a demonstration of salvation history. Such an interest can be seen in the following extract (notes rather than verbatim) from the most animated session of close study with this group, during which the only unsolicited interpretative comment of the series from a group member (italicised) occurred.

Text: John 1:43-51

Leader: What Old Testament references are there to underline the revelation of Jesus as Messiah in this passage? It says that Jesus is expected by 'Moses and the prophets' – what does this refer to? [pause; leader answers]

Leader: The Law and the Prophets = the Old Testament: the books of Moses (the first five) plus the prophets. Where is Jesus referred to in the first five books? Is there a reference to the Old Testament elsewhere in this passage – where?

Group: [after some hesitation] Jacob's ladder?

Leader: How does Jacob's ladder fit in with Jesus? [pause; leader answers]

Leader: Jesus is at least as important as Jacob as father of the nation; ascending/descending is a feature of John's Gospel. How might these ideas connect?

[pause]

Leader: Might Jesus be described as Jacob's ladder between heaven and earth?

[new idea to group; pause]

Leader: What do you think? Does the idea work?

[Group hesitantly agrees]

Group: *Could it also be a reference to the resurrection?*

Leader: Yes, that could well be the case. And there's another Old Testament reference in v51 – the Son of Man – what does that refer to?

Group: Daniel and Ezekiel references; meaning 'heavenly being' or 'myself'; possibly both; the ambiguity is intended.

[NB the respondent in this section is mostly DB, who knows the Bible well]

Group: There's a possible question about Nathanael as a true Israelite – does this imply the falsity of others?

Leader: Note the potential anti-Semitism of John's Gospel, because of the historical situation of the Gospel's readers. How does Nathanael show himself a true Israelite?

[pause]

Leader explains significance of Nazareth as not very 'kosher' – a North-South divide!

Leader: Are there other Old Testament references?

Group: The fig tree, significant of Israel and its fruitfulness?

Leader: Yes; vine and fig tree also symbolise peaceful times; and remember the cursing of the fig tree – when the Messiah came, all fig trees were expected to flower and fruit.

The group's interest in the appropriation of the Hebrew Bible within the Gospels underlines their use of a Gadamerian transmission of meaning down the generations by tradition, this time from the people of Israel to Christians today. Such a teleological focus bypasses the necessity of addressing more critical questions to the Gospels. Yet, understood as an aspect of both form and redaction criticism, attention to such intertextuality also informs a critical reading of the text. Given, then, the paradoxical conservative Relating strategy of considering history significant but reading the texts as if they were ahistorical narratives, this is the most likely aspect of historical-critical methods to be welcomed in such a group.

Experience enters into the Gospel story

How do conservative Relaters fare with the tool of experience? The literary emphasis taken up from Auerbach by both Frei and Ricoeur on conforming one's experience to the Christian story, rather than vice versa, is followed, here explicitly, in the interpretative dynamic of conservative Relating:

DB: In the Bible we read of others who have encountered the power of God, who have seen him act supernaturally in their lives, who have heard him speak deep into their hearts – and we, who are on the outside of all this, long to enter into the story and truly to be characters in the action.

Then we read of Jesus, God himself, who speaks the words which only God can speak. And he says that he can take us there, into the thick of the action and that he will be with us now and also for ever. His words and his stories are not like ours but carry the stamp of ultimate authority... To take an example, on a superficial level he talks about a shepherd searching for and finding a lost and helpless sheep. Deeper down he is saying that, however we try, there are things which we cannot do for others or for ourselves. Only he can show us that we are lost in the first place, that only he can find us, only he can rescue us, only he will work at drawing us to himself and only with him will we find our true peace and true identity.

On this account, our own experience makes sense only as we become characters in the Gospel story: only Jesus can make us aware that we are 'lost in the first place'.

We must hear the story of the good shepherd's offer to find and rescue us in order to be able to respond correctly, telling how we have found 'true peace and true identity'. Literary scholars such as Fowl (see Chapter 1) highlight the emphasis, particularly strong in conservative Relaters, on the formation of character through Bible study as a result of our story being drawn into the story of the text (see also Ricoeur's 'world in front of the text' in Chapter 3). Such a dynamic, where an agreed understanding of the text always interprets the interpreter's own life rather than vice versa, makes the use of experience prior to study of the texts problematic in a group for whom the relevance of Bible study to daily life is crucial.

Gospel as the grammar of experience

This theoretical difficulty was mirrored in practice. Though study sessions were taking place within a long-term group, where participants knew each other well, and the theme of discussion – chosen by the group – was known before each session began, personal experience on each topic was elicited from the group only with difficulty. This dynamic can be traced back to the group's theological worldview. Where God's revelation is found through correct understanding of the texts rather

than through experience in the world, there is little motivation for discernment of divine revelation *through* as well as *about* one's extra-church life. Directly opposing Segundo's hermeneutical strategy of second-order learning – the construction of new ideological responses to new historical situations – Lindbeck's work on doctrine as the grammar of faith implies that, until the paradigmatic text has been disclosed, conservative Relaters cannot be sure how their personal narrative should be construed. Under these circumstances, silence is the safer part.

Sadly, the church-related nature of the discussion topics chosen by the group only increased the danger of inadvertently giving a theologically 'wrong' answer.

Experience shared, therefore, was frequently of problems correctly solved in the past – in terms of doctrine, correctly parsed sentences – rather than of difficulties requiring resolution in the present – potentially ungrammatical utterances.

One typical example (below) concerns the question of coping when God seems a long way away, a topic suggested by one of the newer members of the group. Note several attempts (italicised) by more long-standing group members to solve the problem during the sharing of experience, before a potentially relevant Bible passage has been announced, let alone studied.

Feeling of isolation and questioning as teenager when family member had made a Christian commitment and evidently changed, while group member was searching for personal experience of God, apparently in vain.

Not always in crisis situations but sometimes when life is flat, searching for meaning – there must be more than going through the motions of Christian life dutifully.

Contrast between good group experiences as Christian young people and boredom of intervening church life. 'You can't live on the mountaintop all the time' quoted as an excuse for Christian life not feeling meaningful all the time?

But you can't live at full stretch all the time.

Another teenage experience: feeling of hopelessness, impossibility of success induced looking for God, on the basis that it can't be as bad as this all the time. But God seemed far away.

Things going badly/uncertainty tend to make one think of God more than things

going well, e.g. in redundancy after first job leading to change of career, let-downs in friendships.

Parallel with Jesus' bad patches has helped, identification with him.

Distance is sometimes felt more when things going well, no time day-to-day is then given to quiet and peace to get close to God.

Every sort of situation can bring us closer to God, like every sort of weather – good times after bad can be more appreciated because of earlier rough bits...

Inspiration/understanding is given on a currently difficult topic: this gives reassurance of God's presence as well as more understanding.

The witness of others who have been through difficult times also encourages in times of perceived distance from God, increases one's willingness to receive.

The 'right answer' – in this instance, that there is in fact no problem, because every situation can bring us closer to God – was known before the discussion began, and had only to be applied. Seen as a lesson in doctrinal grammar, teaching group members how to form their characters and interpret their own lives, a conservative Relating group could make good use of such a discussion of personal experience; but that, of course, would not be Bible study. As it is, the hermeneutical strategy of considering personal experience prior to focussing on the texts appears to be as unhelpful for conservative Relaters as for Thinkers.

Liberal Relaters

What, then, of liberal Relaters? How do their ways of dealing with history and experience compare with those of literary academic interpreters, Thinkers and their more conservative Relating colleagues? Since the literary interpreters in my survey evince a more conservative theological stance than those avowing historical-critical approaches, resonances between academic and liberal Relating approaches will be fewer than has been the case for conservative Relaters. However, while at times liberal Relaters' theological slant brings them closer to Thinkers' understanding, at other times their value- rather than idea-driven appropriative mode links them with

their conservative colleagues. In this way they gain advantages from both modes of appropriation.

Empathy with the Gospel message

Like Thinkers, liberal Relaters generally understand Gospel 'history' critically as the background of the times. Unlike Thinkers, however, they are cautious about engaging with such background history, maybe because they do not feel sufficiently competent to understand it:

AN: I don't tend to take [the Gospels] in their historical context; no, I'm just looking at the content and the message, all the time, to try and understand it better... I don't think I'm knowledgeable enough yet to go deeper into the background of it all.

Instead, they focus on the foreground Gospel narrative, the value-laden message of the texts. Through an empathetic engagement with these events and characters reminiscent of Collingwood's historical imagination (see Chapter 3), they span the gap between then and now, using Ricoeur's understanding of the past as Same.

They hold this understanding in common with conservative Relaters. In contrast to the conservative Relating focus on Gospel events alone, however, liberal Relaters can empathise not only with the biblical characters described in the texts but also with the communities discerned behind the texts:

S: The connections we were trying to make between our experience and the experiences of the people back then... Do you think we got any glimpses of the readers, the first readers of the texts, those communities?

AR: Yeah, I think we did. I think we felt an identification along with them... All through it, really.

They reach this identification by their ability to integrate an empathetic focus on the texts with the additional insights offered by historical-critical close study, which

conservative Relaters reject. Their motivation for the close study of the texts offered in community hermeneutics, however, differs from that of the Thinkers. For the latter, historical-critical methods are significant chiefly for the explanatory power they offer. For liberal Relaters, such analysis is a means to glimpse earlier Christian communities with whom experience and faith may be shared.

Here a possible academic analogy may be drawn: Stuhlmacher's attempt to modify Troeltsch's understanding of history by a supplementary principle of attentiveness to the texts (*Vernehmen*). Stuhlmacher's intention was that historical-critical interpretations should be augmented by the 'praxis of faith' – personal and communal Bible study, preaching and Christian living. Liberal Relaters' hermeneutic may be congruent with this rather vague suggestion.

At ease with experience

If empathy with people both within and 'behind' the texts, enabled by the use of historical-critical methods, is one end of the bridge which links liberal Relaters to the past, the other end is the present-day personal experience of those studying them. Thinkers must be coaxed to share experience at all; conservative Relaters are self-censored by the necessity of making experience consonant with the grammar of faith and the correct understanding of the as yet unstudied text. Liberal Relaters, in contrast, can be restrained only with difficulty from sharing their experiences, whether the theme is church-related or a matter of life outside church. Over a series of group sessions, as people get to know each other better, this dynamic is self-reinforcing, improving people's ability to listen to each other and hence to share deeper and more important matters.

History and experience in tandem

Given this appreciation of historical criticism and this ease with experience, it is not surprising that the two predominantly liberal Relating groups studied both found it easy to make discussion flow from experience to text and from text to reflection.

This second look through the cycle of community hermeneutics at the pericopes of Jesus preaching in Nazareth, discussed by a largely Relating group, gives a taste of the process. Notice the more coherent, thematic nature of the discussion and, in particular, how the theme of prophecy, coming from the initial discussion of experience, follows right through:

Experience (theme: transformation)

Transformation is not always possible. You need the belief things can be changed, via prophets. Who are modern prophets? Holloway; Tutu; Mandela; Gandhi; the prophetic ferment of such groups as this... The congregational level is where transformatory, visionary energy is required.

Close study: Matthew 13:53-58/Mark 6:1-6a/Luke 4:16-30

Context of Lukan passage: the temptation in the wilderness just before the beginning of Jesus' mission. Jesus puts himself in the context of Isaiah by that quote in Nazareth. He gives examples of recognition of a prophet by outsiders, not the Jewish community. Luke's community might be outsiders to be encouraged, or insiders who needed challenging to notice outsiders. There is a relationship between what Jesus said about himself and then the following passage showing him giving freedom to the man possessed by demons: his words and actions correlate. Just before the Luke passage, no one knows him, but by v37 crowds were following him, so it charts his sudden rise to fame: a transformation of reputation. There is transformation in the other direction: the crowd starting from admiration but goes to homicidal intent. In Luke this follows the temptations, at the outset of his ministry; in Matthew, Mark it is shorter, set in the middle of Jesus' ministry, preceded by parables, miracles. Returning to Luke: the titles for him change: son of Joseph (ordinary) to prophet to son of God (demon recognition). He is seen as a prophet in the synagogue because of the Isaiah quote: 'spirit of God' in Isaiah's terms is not a claim to divinity, but still ('anointed') a high claim. Was this liable to annoy Nazareth people? But they approved at that point. The idea of outsiders being helped by God was annoying. Back to parallels: Luke shows this as logical, the natural start of ministry for a young prophet, but in the other two it's in the middle of his teaching, just one more journey. They are not making outsider/identity points so much as Luke: shorter versions, no details on what he read in synagogue, but the names of his family are included. So why has Luke quoted the Old Testament passage when the others don't? There's emphasis on the Spirit in Luke. Maybe too it depends who he's writing the Gospel

for. Who would it make sense for? A Jewish audience, because of the Old Testament references? But this doesn't fit with previous descriptions of Gospel communities, Luke's church being Gentile. Maybe it's put in because there are positive references to Gentiles in this part of the Old Testament. Also, the passage doesn't refer to the Jewish community at all but lays stress on universal salvation. It's put before the call of Jesus' disciples, as in Matthew and Mark, so Jesus is on his own here: it's a manifesto seeking followers. Yet Matthew and Mark have teaching before too, and stress that a prophet is without honour in his own house: an anti-family comment? The Gospels don't emphasise family as much as we do: this is a modern emphasis, since at the beginning, celibacy was the thing... There may have been resistance to transformation because we feel comfortable in the status quo – a perfect connection to the reflection section!

Reflection

Sometimes complacency impedes transformation; there is much more communication between different churches and more structured worship now... there is little discussion of sermon now after service; preaching is not transformatory now? New ways of teaching are needed. The challenge was unpopular. One example of preaching experienced by group member was: 'we can learn from the frequent prayer of Muslims' – was it heard by the congregation?

Guest preachers can say harder things; a home preacher is more cautious, lives with the consequences. Preaching may not be followed by action; the church is a stable place in the midst of change – but if it doesn't change, maybe it isn't church; should the church be seen as a risk-taker?

Examples of change are encouraging; more commitment and openness; risk-taking in culture, music with variety; shared worship-leading are risk-taking (if not made into a new norm). But failure lives long in the memory, competence in gifts is crucial – church experience of multi-media is embarrassing when it goes wrong.

The church should be able to integrate change, since people are always coming and going. Transformation takes time – but should not take too long! – there's a need to avoid institutionalisation.

Transformation needs encouragement and action locally; sermons are acceptable, individual appeals less so; there's a risk in standing up and speaking for God prophetically; discernment is needed – it can be dangerous (e.g. witness at Faslane). Change in society is a challenge to the church e.g. new forms of family life. The challenge to change church ways parallels the situation in Nazareth; we need to give space for discernment, for new communities to be forged.

Relaters' use of historical-critical methods

As a whole, Relating appropriation has much in common with literary hermeneutics:

for both sets of interpreters the goal is the fusion of horizons between then and now.

However, a conservative/liberal spectrum, focussed in my research on two

contrasting positions, is evident within the field. In their rejection of a differentiating

analysis of the Gospel texts, conservative Relaters have much in common with narrativists who leave historical-critical methods behind, yet they can find some profit in more literary approaches to criticism. In contrast, liberal Relaters use both historical-critical analysis and literary empathy to link the texts with personal experience, in order to make more sense of both.

Dialogue with the Academy

How can Christian academic interpreters benefit from Relating hermeneutics?

Though one hopes no reminder is needed, they can return the favour offered to local-church study groups in the use of scholarly *phronesis* by encouraging their Thinking colleagues in the eirenic and sensitive pursuit of biblical studies within the scholarly community. Those at the more conservative end of the spectrum who focus on the christological narrative of the Gospels may be encouraged by the conservative Relating group's positive reaction to exploration of the intertextuality between the Old and the New Testaments, though this is no new insight. Surprisingly, however, liberal Relaters' integration of historical-critical and literary hermeneutical strategies is not mirrored in many theoretical approaches to the texts. Beyond Ricoeur's critical supplementation of Gadamer's hermeneutic of tradition, taken up by Schneiders, which informs the framework of community hermeneutics, there is a paucity of academic interpretation integrating historical-critical and literary approaches rather than, like Fowl, eclectically 'spoiling the Egyptians'. Watson's more recent work could be a move in this direction; further research in this area could prove profitable for academic as well as for lay interpreters.

Changing hermeneutics

The vexed question of the extent to which liberation theologies, arising in the developing world, may legitimately be applied to other contexts is too large to treat here, and I shall not attempt to do so. Arguably, the mode of textual appropriation I have labelled as Changing has resonances with liberation hermeneutics in its transformatory goals. Yet I have found these resonances harder to evidence with reference to my fieldwork than parallels already drawn between Thinking and historical-critical approaches or Relating and literary hermeneutics.

While the pattern of Changing is as distinct as that of Thinking or Relating, in practice the Changing mode has been only patchily evidenced in my interviewees. This may partly be because, as will be seen below, Thinking and Relating modes form part of the Changing hermeneutical strategy. A more major reason, however, may be that many of my fieldwork participants tended to use the Changing mode to supplement Thinking or Relating rather than relying on it more substantially. For this reason, I shall supplement the Changing evidence from my fieldwork with interview material describing contextual Bible study (CBS), a method of Bible study with significant similarities with community hermeneutics which has been developed in the Scottish context (for further details see Anum 2002, 224-236).

There are differences between the practicalities of my approach (see Appendix II for more details) and that of CBS. Texts for CBS study are taken from the whole Bible, not just the Gospels. Facilitators for CBS generally choose the text for one-off Bible studies, paying attention to what they know about the group's situation to make it as germane as possible to the context. This, however, is equivalent to the leader's

control over the texts chosen within community hermeneutics. CBS begins with text rather than experience and, after a question about initial reactions to the material chosen, goes through a close reading before inviting more connections with people's circumstances. However, through seeking people's initial reactions to the text, personal experience has already been invoked before close reading begins (see the example from Liverpool below); this allows experience to interpret the texts as well as to be interpreted by them.

In spite of these logistical differences, then, CBS has sufficient congruence with community hermeneutics to supplement the evidence of my fieldwork over a longer timeframe and a wider span of experience. By examination of this evidence I hope to establish not only resonances between Changing and academic liberative approaches, but also why Changing as a mode has not been more evident in my own fieldwork.

As described by John McLuckie, an Episcopalian priest who has been directly involved with its development in Scotland since 1996, CBS originated with the work of Gerald West in South Africa (see Chapter 1). A group of academically trained readers in Glasgow began to work with Bible study groups, using five hermeneutical commitments taken from West's work:

JMc: There are [CBS] commitments to a reading engaging with a *close, communal* and *critical* reading of the Bible... but also towards *transformation* – social and personal transformation – and always working with those who are themselves *poor or marginalized* or those who work in solidarity with them [my italics].

These commitments tie in well with the appropriative modes of my grounded theory: 'close' and 'critical' study resonates with Thinking, 'communal' study with Relating and study which is 'in solidarity with the poor' and 'transformatory' with Changing.

As I have already argued, moreover (see Chapter 7), Changing as a mode is enabled by the use of both Thinking and Relating. As before, I shall address the use first of history and then of experience as hermeneutical tools, focussing this time on eventual outcome.

Close and critical study

CBS facilitators avoid the overt use of historical-critical methods, because of the danger of setting up the leader as the unchallenged expert in 'background' history.

JMc: I suppose the advantage [of CBS] over using historical-critical methods is that it doesn't rely on specialist knowledge. There's always a difficulty, I think, where expert knowledge is required, that that knowledge can become too specialised. And I think if a group has to rely on something outside of itself for its reading resources, I think that could possibly lead to a decline in their confidence in handling scripture and indeed in doing theology for themselves.

However, their use of both 'close' and 'critical' reading covers territory similar to the historical-critical techniques used in community hermeneutics:

JMc: We've tended to work with the printed text and the close reading, paying close attention to the actual structures of the text... the sequence of events as it emerges and the vocabulary and so on... that's the close bit. We read critically... in the sense that... we're employing people's ordinary critical skills, that's an interest, in the sense that people can be given permission to disagree with the text, if you like, to find it difficult or to find it contradictory.

S: Has that posed any difficulties? Have any groups raised pious objections?

JMc: Surprisingly not. Because we're not up-front about that. In the sense that we don't... foreground it, we don't say: We're going to be reading this text critically... we simply ask the questions of people... And people [are] quite surprising sometimes, in the range of their critical reading, from backgrounds whom you would not normally associate with critical reading skills...

The content of some of the questions posed in CBS groups also looks very much like historical-critical exegesis:

S: Are you still asking a question about those communities... as opposed to these communities now?

- JMc: Oh, very much. I mean, we will often say things like, in prophetic texts... we will ask what kind of context it was written for, what kinds of injustices do you think are being addressed here? From the text.... Not needing to know more about the Bible. I guess we've tried to use texts where they wouldn't need to know a great deal else. They might need to know there's been an exile... and there's the return from exile. We wouldn't want to add an awful lot.
- S: It sounds in a way as if historical criticism is part of your armoury.
- JMc: Oh, it is. It is. But... we don't call it that... And we certainly don't do anything to train those skills independently of the process of reading itself... We assume people have a certain level of critical consciousness anyway.
- S: And is that assumption validated?
- JMc: Yes – yes, it is. Very much so. They will often happily speculate. And we get them to do that. Use your imaginations, we'll say... Guess what might be going on here.

Making connections between world and text

It seems that when the question of history is not raised – as, indeed, it was not in community hermeneutics until *post factum* interviews – the imagination can connect the world people know and that of the text by a process similar to Collingwood's historical imagination (see discussion above and Chapter 3). This dynamic works in the opposite direction to that of conservative Relaters. One example from McLuckie demonstrates this ability of 'ordinary' readers:

- JMc: One brilliant example of this... was the group in Liverpool who were asked to do something non-textual [because of a problem with literacy], and presented the Unforgiving Servant... In a highly stylised, dramatical form, which was great fun. And it was fascinating, because there was a young woman from this very poor community in Liverpool, and we asked them [for] first reactions. And her first judgement on the characters they were most condemning of, in that story, were the fellow servants who sneaked on the servant who didn't forgive.
- S: Oh, interesting! People who are usually background characters, and don't come in one way or the other...
- JMc: Sneaks! [laughter] Breaking solidarity! They should have dealt with him... you know, quietly, but certainly not gone to the king about it.

Given that CBS is a study process where the use of background historical context, excluding group members with less academic knowledge, is deliberately avoided, it

seems that Boff's 'correspondence of terms' (see Chapter 1) is being used here.

However, it is also reminiscent of Segundo's second-order learning (again, see Chapter 1): the point taken by the interpreter cited is the second-order duty of solidarity under oppression, rather than specific first-order instructions on how to behave when in debt.

Ricoeur's third understanding of the past as Analogue (see Chapter 3) is also relevant, here at one remove: though the Gospel text in this anecdote is already a parable, a description of Jesus' actions could have been analysed in the same way. Though the retelling is evidently an interpretation and not the original, it picks up on the manner (*wie*) of the original from a particular perspective: that of the interpreter's own experience.

History through the perspective of experience

Such interpretation may raise an eyebrow with academics, accustomed to a less partisan approach to interpretation. Yet comfortable people in middle-class churches may experience difficulty, beyond that empathy exercised by liberal Relaters, in identifying the liberative narratives of the Gospels as *our* story. Whatever their academic disadvantages, the group McLuckie describes did not experience this difficulty. This dynamic is described in liberationist terms as the hermeneutical privilege of the poor (see West 1999a, 130), one which bridges the chronological gap between current experience and the Gospel texts by analogy.

Such an approach, theologically based on the premise of salvation history – connecting Gospel history then with the continuing story now – resonates with the hermeneutical strategy of one Changer with personal experience of Palestine:

GW: Personally I tend to major on the socio-political historical side of things, because I've just been immersed in that, having been there... Bible stories, but for me it's not just an academic pursuit, because I've lived among Palestinian Jewish communities. It's a living story... And it adds to the livingness of it, the fact that I'd go shopping in Nazareth.

Another Changer uses the imperative of God's coming kingdom to bridge then and now in the same way:

EB: I think... that if you're going to be a Christian at all and follow Jesus' teaching... [y]ou have to think of what is happening now. I mean, I don't know: the kingdom of God? The kingdom of heaven?... Jesus said it's here, now...

In my fieldwork as a whole, however, salvation history has not been a favoured approach. Given the ambivalent reactions of many Thinking and Relating interviewees to the whole question of 'history' in relation to the Gospels, seeing the Gospels as history and simultaneously as our story has been problematic. Going by CBS and community hermeneutics, however, it seems possible to sidestep this problem and the potential disablement of group members not privy to expert background knowledge, by calling on that critical ability which group members habitually exercise in their own experience to make sense of the biblical texts.

JMc: Sometimes we've had to at least give a very, very minimal amount of contextual information: we've said, This is a letter to the early Christian community, but then we might go right into the question, What kind of community do we think this is, what discussion is going on here?...

S: That sounds like a historical-critical question to me, and a very good one too!

JMc: Well, we do ask those questions... But we ask them relying on people's ordinary critical skills.

Diversity in experience and interpretation

The only participants in my fieldwork consistently demonstrating a salvation-history approach to the texts came from the most homogeneous group: the conservative Relaters. They could achieve this by focussing on one version of Gospel history,

giving its pattern to our own story, and disregarding diversity in text or experience.

Yet McLuckie strongly argues against homogenising a group's theological or demographic stance in order to be able to identify the Gospels' story as our own. On the contrary, an acceptance of diversity is essential:

- JMc: I think people have to... accept the diversity of the group for it to work. If they don't accept the legitimacy of the group's diversity, it won't work.
- S: In this context, how do you mean, diversity?
- JMc: Well, from diverse theological positions. So that if a group's uncomfortable with the fact that they're being facilitated by a Catholic monk –
- S: Ah. Then there would be a problem.
- JMc: But also to be able to accept the legitimacy of various interpretations. Not just particular interpretations, but that there can be various interpretations.
- S: And you don't go away at the end of the evening thinking, 'Ah, that's what it said.'
- JMc: And that's been the biggest methodological or theological issue, I think. I think people have to... accept that, for it to work.

Stress on the diversity of group membership and interpretative interest is consistent with such liberationist accounts as Cardenal's *Love in Practice: The Gospel in Solentiname* (Cardenal 1977, ix-x). Members of the long-term Changing group I observed also used their diversity from the norm in specific areas – for example, disability – to look for a liberative rather than an oppressive reading of their own experience. Such use of personal experience divergent from the norm in interpreting the biblical texts also carries a hermeneutical privilege, as McLuckie comments:

- JMc: [O]f course, even in suburban parish groups there will be people who for other reasons are marginalised, because of gender or sexuality or disability or – for a range of reasons, people might find, themselves, that there is a marginality in that group too, which also opens up attentiveness to other voices. So... we never refused an invitation on the grounds that a group was too prosperous, as it were... Because I think partly it's challenging stereotypes of what poverty is, too.

Such an understanding ties up with the second wave of liberation theology described in Chapter 1. On this basis, as I have already mentioned in the context of adult

education (Chapter 8), the all-female liberal Relating group I studied may be understood in a proto-Changing light. Stories about marginalisation related to their gender –specifically their experiences as daughters, wives and mothers – formed the core of the participants' shared understanding. This developed through the sessions into a distinct group identity, enhancing connection with the biblical texts. Their approach to the texts was also from a female perspective, divergent from the androcentric bias of the Gospels.

Since a distancing historical-critical move is built into community hermeneutics, the hermeneutical strategy of this group, compared with that of the Liverpool group instanced above, could be paralleled with Boff's 'correspondence of relationships' (see Chapter 1). It could be argued that the group's relative homogeneity of experience worked against their hermeneutic being classified as liberationist. Because no very disparate experiences of 'being women' (such as being single, childless, lesbian, younger, Black, poor) were brought to the texts, apart from the male-female polarity underlying the discussion, the group's collectively privileged worldview remained relatively unchallenged. This can be seen in their discussion of 'the poor' in the Beatitudes (see Appendix I). Yet Freire's work has been critiqued on a similar basis for using a purely class-based analysis and ignoring gender and race as factors of oppression; liberation, like oppression, is a matter of degrees rather than of absolutes. Moreover, of the six groups set up for study purposes, this group alone has produced a communal response to my analysis: its members are about to set themselves up as a longer-term group for Bible study and mutual support, the only one in that parish. Arguably, whether best classified as Relating or as Changing (see discussion in Chapter 7), this is transformative action.

Communal identity, shared authority

How was this enabled? Here the CBS commitment to 'communal' reading is significant. Most participants in my fieldwork groups had in common only a desire to study the Bible and attendance at the same church; all but two groups met for six or fewer sessions. In these circumstances the development of a longer-term communal identity in even one group seems little short of miraculous. One of the ecumenical Lent groups observed also showed signs of a developing identity but, being composed of people from half a dozen different church communities, collapsed after the designated period of study was over. Yet, given my less encouraging experiences with the two longer-term groups, communal reading cannot be the whole answer. McLuckie's description of the resistance sometimes encountered in CBS groups, similar to the Relating misinterpretation described in Appendix I, is significant in this context:

JMc: Some people just don't get the method... they feel quite threatened in fact by the idea that... there isn't an interpretative steer being offered in the process; there isn't a –

S: A right answer at the back of the book?

JMc: Yeah. Quite, quite. Nor is there an authoritative voice in the group... people find that very challenging, and sometimes threatening, sometimes they've been exhilarated by the challenge, and sometimes they've not come back. We've had... groups, one parish we worked in had had a very successful series of Bible studies which were very much on the kind of being talked to model... Which went very well. And some people came along to the group we were running, expecting to receive the same thing, and when it wasn't the same thing, some people didn't come back – and other people who heard about it, came.

Given a model of Bible study where group participation is foundational, the CBS group has evolved techniques of facilitation – making sure everyone's voice is heard, writing up people's exact words, work in small groups and avoiding/defusing power confrontations – which I have also endeavoured to use. CBS facilitation, however,

has been more successful than some of my own attempts in ignoring the pressure on the leader to give 'right' answers, whether concerning the texts or people's own experience. As group leader I have found the sharing of expertise to be an ambivalent process which group members do not always welcome (see Appendix I for further discussion).

Contrariwise, as the long-term Changing group's incoherent reaction to community hermeneutics demonstrated (see description in Chapter 7 and analysis in Chapter 8), the successfully shared authority which is a strength of the group observed can also be a weakness, when manifested as the inability to focus on an externally fixed programme. Yet when such a group does concentrate on a mutually agreed goal, the result is powerful. This was the only group I encountered whose discussion had led to joint social action on homelessness, affecting not only themselves but also the whole congregation from which they had originally come, as well as the wider community beyond the church.

Commitment to solidarity and transformation

Here the CBS commitment to reading with – or with those in solidarity with – poor and marginalised people is germane. In this CBS differs significantly from community hermeneutics, since no ideological commitments were asked of the church groups with which I worked. Where CBS worked with wealthier groups, for example, the facilitators might comment that the voices of those less well off would not be heard in the debate; given my desire as a researcher not to influence group study towards any particular conclusion, I felt unable to do this. Judging by their

actions, the Changing group observed seems to have agreed on a commitment similar to that of CBS, where other groups observed did not.

Of course, a group's motivation and goals will also depend on its own socioeconomic and geographical setting, as McLuckie acknowledges:

JMc: When you're working with middle-class engaged groups, with a kind of social justice agenda, [they're asking themselves]... How can we help the poor?

S: Whereas the poor groups – what do they get out of it?

JMc: I think it's partly analysis... partly being able to simply have their analysis heard, have their situation recognised and seen, presented, have their voices heard. But also I think it is often... a couple of things that come out of it: one is a sense of empowerment, support for, as I say, people's basic survival strategies, often... Less often, it's been a question of allowing people to focus a kind of organised response to a particular issue. That's the thing [I saw] often in some of the liberation texts, which I haven't seen happen very often in our context...

S: Why do you think that opportunity hasn't presented itself? Because I agree: in the Latin American context, and I guess in the South African as well, that's what happens. Or that's what gets written up, anyway.

JMc: That's right. I guess it has to do with partly the way that social... programmes operate in this country... I mean, because we have a relatively sophisticated social services programme, community development programme, at a statutory level, there aren't really many instances of other groups taking that on themselves.

This attention to the Scottish context throws some light on the personal rather than social nature of the transformation experienced through community hermeneutics as well as CBS, a claim evidenced by the liberal Relating study group it engendered, as well as by the testimony of one Changing interviewee:

EP: I am just amazed that seeing a poster by chance about a Lent Group [one of my fieldwork groups] has had such a major effect on my thinking and life.

Changers' use of historical-critical methods

This analysis, however, also highlights some of the reasons why no closer parallels can be drawn between my fieldwork and liberationist hermeneutics. Close and

critical reading can be performed using the Thinking ability of 'ordinary' readers, as CBS and community hermeneutics both testify – Fowl's suggestion that church reading should employ scholarly *phronesis* (see Chapter 1) has borne fruit. Relaters can provide shared identity within a relatively stable close community to read the texts communally, though within the Scottish Reformed context the existence of such longer-term groups cannot be taken for granted.

Using both these skills, historical-critical methods can be used to connect the text's story with our own though – as in CBS – such methods may prefer not to speak their name. However, the long-term practice of such study, fostering an ability to deal with diversity within the group, enabling a sharing of poverty experienced and leading to a commitment to solidarity with people in poverty and to transformation, necessitates changes in thinking and behaviour which relatively few are prepared to make. Notwithstanding, liberationist approaches still appear the most fruitful hermeneutical parallel to Changing hermeneutics.

Dialogue with the Academy

Liberationists with a foothold within the Academy – feminist, Black or gay theologians, for example – are frequently ghettoised into speaking for a specific group and thereby written off as irrelevant by academics in other contexts. As McLuckie suggests, however, a broader understanding of poverty and difference, such as that evidenced in some church study groups, is required for solidarity between liberationists in the Academy and Changers in the churches to become a practical as well as a theoretical reality. It is to be hoped that more academics, following West and the work of CBS, will give this matter both theoretical and

practical consideration. Even on the margins of the Academy, theirs is the power to share or withhold knowledge and, as this thesis has demonstrated, sharing it can have very concrete effects on people's lives.

Fruitful uses of historical-critical methods

My study of hermeneutical methods to be found within local-church Bible study groups has uncovered a wide variety of textual appropriation modes. In West's terms (see West 1993, 27-47; also Chapters 1 and 10), Thinkers will find interest in the background history behind the text and look to historical-critical methods for analysis. Conservative Relaters, focussing on the unity of the text, will look to historical-critical methods for literary insight into how the narrative is patterned. Liberal Relaters, empathising with the characters within the text and the communities behind it, will look to historical-critical methods to give more insight into the latter. Changers, focussing on their own experience in front of the text, will use that diversity of experience to appreciate diversity and recognise oppression and liberation within the texts. Given that members with all these tendencies may be found within one study group, how in practice should local-church Bible study using historical-critical methods proceed? This is the subject of my last chapter.

10. The conclusions: some uses of historical-critical methods in local churches

Since work in the field of practical theology should conclude by making practical recommendations (see Campbell 1990, 19), this chapter looks at the implications of my thesis for the practice of local-church study groups. Unshared expertise in church leaders is reiterated as one factor contributing to the original research problem. Unreflective use of the leader's preferred study mode without taking the preferences of group members into account is therefore not recommended. Instead, David Kelsey's threefold analysis of academic theologians' use of scripture depending on their prior construction of the presence of God – ideational, actual or possible – is suggested as a possible diagnostic model for the mode of text appropriation chosen by lay study-group members. Where groups are homogeneous, my research points to ways in which Thinkers, conservative and liberal Relaters and Changers may profit from the use of historical-critical methods of Bible study. Where groups show diversity, however, community hermeneutics is one model of study, incorporating elements from each appropriative mode, which can enable the profitable use of methods of historical-critical exegesis within local-church Bible study groups.

Choice of study mode

Given the variety of text-appropriative modes to be found within one congregation or even study group, how should those with responsibility for local-church Bible study proceed? Since these appropriative modes are driven by incommensurate aims,

claims to normativity made on behalf of any one mode must be suspect, yet decisions on the way in which a study group will approach the texts must be made.

Arguably, in the past the authority exercised by church leaders over their congregations, denying them access to theological knowledge, has been one factor in the theological timelag between academic and lay Bible study which gave rise to my research question (see the anecdote from Smart quoted in Chapter 1). This diagnosis is also borne out by some clerical reactions to CBS:

JMc: We always get some... religious professionals... who don't like it... I think a lot of clergy do feel under threat... It's their kind of interpretative privilege that's at stake.

Unless group leaders are willing to relinquish some of their expert authority, and study-group members to take up some of the responsibility for their own learning, the problem is likely to remain unresolved. Thus one common strategy, for a group leader unreflectively to facilitate that mode of study which they find most congenial, should be resisted. To the extent to which group leader and members happen to have congruent study modes, this may succeed. However, such congruence cannot be assumed and, going by my own fieldwork experiences, a leader's attempt to foist an uncongenial approach upon the group is more likely to lead to silent resistance or physical absence than to conversion.

Uses of scripture by academic theologians

Rather than such a debacle, it seems sensible to establish members' own preferred modes of interpretation in order to take these into account. How can this be done? Here an academic theologian may be a helpful dialogue partner. David Kelsey's definition of scripture in a church context, to be found in *The Uses of Scripture in*

Recent Theology, is very relevant to the modes of appropriation delineated in previous chapters:

Part of what it means to call a text 'Christian scripture' is that it *functions* in certain ways or *does* certain things when used in certain ways in the common life of the church (Kelsey 1975, 90).

Kelsey finds different aspects of the threefold mission of the church – classically *kerygma* (proclamation), *koinonia* (fellowship) and *diakonia* (service) – emphasised in different theologies (Kelsey 1975, 92). This division is coherent with my modes of appropriation, as Thinkers stress *kerygma*, Relaters find *koinonia* vital and Changers are motivated by the need for *diakonia*. He has also identified an equivalent threefold pattern in the way scripture is used by seven academic theologians, among whom 'different judgments about the essence of Christianity lead to different ways of bringing scripture authoritatively to bear on theological proposals' (Kelsey 1975, 8-9):

The seven case studies illustrate three families of ways to construe the mode in which God is present. One way is to construe it in the *ideational* mode. That happens when God is taken to be present in and through the teaching and learning of the doctrine asserted by scripture (Warfield) or the concepts proposed by scripture (Bartsch; Wright)... A second way is to construe it in the mode of *concrete actuality*. That happens when God is taken to be present in and through an agent rendered present by scripture (Barth) or in and through a cosmic process of re-creation (Thornton)... A third way is to construe it in the mode of *ideal possibility*. That happens when God is taken to be present in and through existential events that are occasioned by scripture's kerygmatic statements which announce the possibility of authentic existence (Bultmann) or occasioned by the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ which mediates the power that makes new being possible (Tillich) (Kelsey 1975, 161) [author's emphasis].

Though Kelsey's categories cover a wider range of theological approaches than my own, there are broad similarities; my categories of Thinker, Relater and Changer may be paralleled with theologians judging the ideational, the actual or the possible mode of God's presence to be the essence of Christianity. Interestingly, like my breakdown

of the Relating mode, Kelsey's basic categories group liberal and conservative theologians together. Had my fieldwork covered a wider sample of groups, I might well have encountered conservative Thinkers like Warfield – though I would be pleasantly surprised had such Thinkers found any profit in historical-critical methods of interpretation. Similarly, my categories might have been enlarged had I encountered conservative Changers like the Indian theologian Vinay Samuel (see for example Samuel 1999). It would have been interesting to find out their views on the usefulness of historical-critical methods of Bible study.

On an academic level, the proposition that interpreters choose that mode of textual appropriation they find most congenial is consonant with West's own testimony:

Although we may not readily admit it, the type of interpretive interests we as trained readers have is [a] significant factor in the choice of modes of reading we use. In my own readings of the Bible, for example, I tend to have a special interest in the literary and linguistic aspects of the text. So I tend to use the mode of reading which focuses on the text. However, I often find that a careful and close reading of the text leads me to ask historical and sociological questions, so that while my readings usually begin with the text itself they also move behind the text as well. The opposite movement is the usual practice of a colleague of mine. His special interests are historical and sociological, and so he tends to begin with a reconstruction of the historical and sociological context behind the text. But having established the historical and sociological context behind the text he then reads the text in the light of his reconstructions (West 1993, 74).

According to Kelsey, how may the rationale behind such choices be explained?

What underlies a theologian's decision to construe the scripture to which he [sic] appeals in a certain way rather than another and his decision to use the scripture he construes in certain roles and not others in theological argument?...[O]ur suggestion is that these decisions are decisively shaped by a theologian's prior judgment about how best to construe the mode in which God's presence among the faithful correlates with the use of scripture in the common life of the church (Kelsey 1975, 167).

This suggestion is supported on a local-church level by Andrew D. Dreitcer's

1993 doctoral thesis, *Roles of the Bible in Christian Spirituality*.

Theologies informing 'prior judgment'

Consonant with Kelsey's suggestion, the axial coding framework which shows my grounded theory in diagrammatic form (see Fig. 5 in Chapter 4) begins prior to the interpretative process, indicating some of the theological and demographic factors – cumulatively, the worldview – influencing my interviewees' 'prior judgment'.

As has already been raised in the case of hermeneutics, it might be argued that the unsystematic beliefs of study-group members, most of them academically untrained in theological studies, should not be dignified with the name of theology. Such was certainly the opinion of many of those interviewed. Yet Robert J. Schreiter justifies such study in the following terms, framing congregational life as a *locus theologicus*:

What makes congregations the special places they are is that they are focused on God, in whom they live, move, and have their being. Their members congregate to remember how God has acted in the history of the world and in their own lives. They congregate to discern what is happening to them and to the world today, and to listen for where God is leading them. Theology is an expression of the relation between God and such congregations of faithful, seeking people (Schreiter 1998, 23).

Following Hopewell's original quest (Hopewell 1988a) for a specific myth characterising congregational identity, practitioners of congregational studies have frequently sought to identify one overriding theology within a congregation.

One such analysis, pertaining to attitudes to the church's mission, has identified four possible congregational orientations: Activist, Civic, Evangelistic and Sanctuary (Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll 1984). As I would hope, such categories have resonances with my own typology – Activist corresponding to Changer, Civic to Thinker and Evangelistic/Sanctuary to Relater. However, they do not allow for the intra-congregational variety of interpretative modes uncovered by my fieldwork. Though Carroll and Hopewell admit that a variety of theologies may exist within one

congregation, they argue that 'there is typically a modal or dominant orientation'

(Carroll and Hopewell 1986, 30). Robert Schreiter offers a more nuanced approach:

It is important to emphasize that you will not likely find a single, coherent theology binding a congregation together. There will indeed be fragments, and the picture they create may not easily emerge. You will more likely uncover a variety of theologies, developed in diverse ways and to different extents. These theologies are also likely to differ based on differences in the experiences of members and groups within the congregation. People standing in different social locations within the congregation will understand and act in different ways (Schreiter 1998, 32).

Among these social locations Schreiter isolates church status, age, motivations for joining or staying in a congregation, and relationships with the local and/or denominational context (Schreiter 1998, 32-33). Strangely, gender does not play a specific role in his analysis, though this lacuna may be less surprising in a Roman Catholic priest than in a researcher from a different church context.

While I have tentatively suggested some demographic factors influencing worldview in my own fieldwork – age, class, gender, church status and education (see Tables A and B in Appendix III) – quantitative investigation on a larger statistical scale would be required for significant connections to be made. More evidently significant factors have been overtly theological: ecclesiology, biblical authority, biblical/extra-biblical revelation. Following Kelsey, I should like to focus on the diagnostic question of group members' understanding of 'God's presence among the faithful'. A summary answering this question in the context of my fieldwork produces the by now familiar threefold breakdown:

- For Thinkers, God is to be found within the concepts of the biblical text – though they may disagree profoundly on how these are to be defined – and problematically, if at all, in everyday life.
- For Relaters, God is to be found in the characters and narratives of the text, and within the fellowship of the group.

- For Changers, God is to be found in the texts through the lens of liberation; outside the texts, God is present in those who work for the kingdom's coming, and in the poor and marginalised.

While many study-group members may find themselves in more than one category (as many use more than one study mode: see Appendix III), such a question gives a good indication of how individuals within a study group may intend to appropriate the biblical texts.

However, study in Christian community implies that not only one's own needs should be taken into account. Returning to West's consideration of the threefold division of biblical interpretation into 'behind the text', 'the text itself' and 'in front of the text', he comments that:

Although each participant might favour a particular mode of reading over the others, there is general agreement that each mode of reading has its advantages and disadvantages when it comes to reading the Bible in... churches and communities (West 1993, 47)

His discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each mode (West 1993, 27-47) focusses on the way it helps or hinders study-group members, a diagnosis confirmed by my own fieldwork (see Chapters 5-7, Appraisal sections). In the end, however, he concludes that the choice of method should depend on three factors: the text studied, the group reading and the objectives of the study (West 1993, 48, 73f).

The question of which text is studied, though important, has been less relevant here, since my research has deliberately been limited in scope to study of the Gospels.

Bible study involving other genres – for example Wisdom – may well proceed more fruitfully using other interpretative strategies, such as meditative engagement with the texts. Using my grounded theory, however, considering the group reading the texts will simultaneously elicit the objectives of group members' study.

Living responsibly with difference

Given the likelihood of a variety of study modes within a church congregation, I return to the question: how should Bible study proceed? Here it is instructive to consider one author in congregational studies whose work focusses on intra-congregational theological variety: W. Paul Jones, the author of *Worlds within a congregation: dealing with theological diversity* (Jones 2000). Jones argues that we need two types of community within the church: 'the homogeneity of intimate support' from people who share our values, and 'the "salad bowl community" of accountable diversity'. As one of his interviewees commented:

We often live badly in the world, so we need the church wherein to learn how to live responsibly with difference. If we can do it with theological difference, we can do it anywhere (quoted in Jones 2000, 77).

The case Jones makes for not merely acknowledging but welcoming theological diversity discloses some of his own presuppositions. Truth is no longer non-negotiable, but a matter of dialogue. Disagreement increases one's understanding of one's own position. Scripture as well as experience bear witness to a diversity of members within Christ's body. The uniqueness of each human being demands a variety of approaches, as does the empowerment of lay members of the congregation (Jones 2000, 78). Here is a Changing approach which encompasses the diverse gifts of both Thinking and Relating.

Should a local-church Bible study group be a Thinking or a Relating support group of like-minded people, or a Changing salad bowl of diversity? This may partly depend on the overall constituency of people interested in Bible study; logistically, can more than one group be sustained within a congregation? In my own fieldwork, within the one church I encountered which supported multiple study groups, people

had sorted themselves into 'homogenous groups of intimate support' which differed greatly from one another – though, paradoxically, one of these, the Changing group, was characterised by diversity of interpretative mode.

Where group and leader are of the same mind, my research clearly points to ways in which historical-critical methods may be used to enrich a group's Bible study.

Thinkers and conservative Relaters will profit from study followed by reflection on congruent experience; the former focussing in their exegesis on background history and textual analysis; the latter on the narrative's context and the question of intertextuality with the Hebrew Bible. Liberal Relaters and Changers will appreciate discussion of experience followed by addressing questions generated by their own situation to the text; the former looking to empathise with the historical communities uncovered by historical-critical exegesis; the latter more interested in the transformatory consequences of interpretation for life outside the group.

However, responsible leadership involves challenging as well as supporting group members' habitual appropriative modes (see Appendix I on leadership in community hermeneutics). The Pauline picture of the church as a body (see for example 1 Corinthians 12) also argues for working with difference. Moreover, given the difficulty I have experienced in promoting small-group local-church Bible study, the salad-bowl model of mixed study modes – made up of people who have only an interest in study, and maybe some acquaintance, in common – seems a more likely scenario.

Where there is such a mixture of appropriative modes within a group, the study model of community hermeneutics, containing elements congenial to all the modes

of study I have discovered, offers one way forward for local-church groups wanting to make use of historical-critical methods of Bible study. CBS is another possibility; I look forward to the evolution of further models of Bible study using historical-critical methods to suit specific local needs. For, as this thesis has demonstrated, in spite of ministerial trepidation and congregational suspicion, using historical-critical methods of Bible study is indeed a potentially fruitful approach to the texts, one which can be as profitable for biblical interpreters in local churches as for those in the Academy.

Appendix I: Pitfalls of community hermeneutics

Leadership

The use of both Gadamer's hermeneutical circle and Freire's dialogical style of adult education implies that dialogue rather than monologue is the preferred mode of communication within a group engaging in community hermeneutics; my fieldwork confirmed this. Freire's style of directive rather than authoritarian or laissez-faire leadership expressly aims at facilitating group discussion. Can such a method, however, avoid the charge of manipulation? Consider the definition of Socratic Direction to be found in David Leigh's *A Practical Approach to Group Training*:

Socratic Direction in its simplest form starts by knowing the answers you want to receive and working backwards to the questions necessary to prompt these answers (Leigh 1992, 98).

This is perilously close to crossing the fine line between directive and manipulative leadership. Paula Allman considers, however, that such a misunderstanding of Freire's aims comes from a failure to distinguish between educational methods and educational philosophy:

[S]imply to apply the methods which Freire utilised in literacy campaigns without fully comprehending the philosophical approach leads to gross misapplications of his ideas... to use the approach in the radical way Freire intends it to be used one must share these assumptions [on the nature of full humanity and that of education] (Allman 1988, 95).

Without the ethics associated with Freire's Christian and socialist beliefs, dialogic question posing might indeed be used to steer a group towards the only answer approved by the leader. This would clearly violate the dialogical nature of the group, reverting to a banking style of education, albeit veiled. However, as can be seen from the paucity of Changing interpretation within my fieldwork, and specifically from the

example of the liberal Relating group studying the Beatitudes (see below), unless group members have a prior Changing commitment, Changing leadership does not necessarily entail Changing interpretation. Moreover, the danger of manipulation, inherent in the leadership role, is equally tempting for those operating from a Relating or a Thinking background.

Like group members, leaders must be aware of their own personal agendas (see below); unlike group members, they must be careful not to favour their own approach. An authoritarian use of the power inherent in leadership will inevitably diminish a leader's authority; unconvinced group members, such as the conservative Relaters observed (see Chapter 6), have the weapon of non-participation in reserve.

However, good as well as bad use of Socratic question-posing is possible, as at least one group of liberal Relaters discovered (see positive feedback, Chapter 6), and as Schneiders also describes:

To ask the right question and to ask it rightly constitutes a hermeneutical art, the art at which Socrates excelled and through which he brought his dialogue partners to understanding of justice, beauty, and courage and thus to an understanding of themselves (Schneiders 1999, 142).

In rejecting a banking approach to learning, moreover, Freire does not recommend the wholly nondirective facilitation adopted by such approaches as Carl Rogers' person-centred learning or Malcolm Knowles' andragogy (see Chapter 8 for more details on both). In the teacher-student relationship, the teacher necessarily has more power and, as Freire acknowledged (Freire 1993, 117), the group leader must walk a tightrope between too much and too little control. This is underlined by my fieldwork fiasco concerning the long-term Changing group observed (see the discussion in

Chapter 8). However, the proper functioning of a group depends not only on the leader, but also on the participants.

Participants

The power of a group leader only functions insofar as the members of a group give her the authority to exercise that power. As Jill Baldwin and Hank Williams acknowledge in *Active learning: a trainer's guide* (Baldwin and Williams 1988, 27): 'Power is what you start with. It's how you use it that will give you authority, or not.' In Baldwin's experience, participants frequently refuse to take up that share of power in a learning situation which is rightfully theirs:

It's amazing how people insist on seeing you as powerful, however much you try and share the power in the situation with them. People don't always want to feel powerful. It brings too much responsibility (Baldwin and Williams 1988, 30-31).

The book connects this problem with a Transactional Analysis (see Stewart and Joines 1987) diagnosis of such a group. The facilitator plays the role of Parent, allocated all the expertise and responsibility for making the group work, while the group members respond in the role of dependent Child (Baldwin and Williams 1988, 49). This chimes in with the initial passivity of some groups in my fieldwork, accustomed to heavier ministerial direction.

A reframing process is evidently needed, in which participants, treated as adults, co-operate in the joint venture of learning. However, the possibility of change inherent in learning, especially in learning about one's faith (see Hull's analysis, Chapter 8), means that some resistance from participants is to be expected. Sadly, examples of misinterpretation encountered in my fieldwork, as well as the evidence of CBS (see Chapter 9) back this up.

Misinterpretation

For Gadamer, misinterpretation is due to human finitude. For Habermas and the liberationists, from whose insights Watson and Schneiders have borrowed, it arises from sinful ideologies distorting the texts' liberative drive, or (for the second wave of liberationists) to be found within the texts themselves. Coming from a literary approach, which does not privilege authorial meaning, Fowl can argue that it is in fact authors, redactors and readers, rather than texts, who have ideologies (Fowl 1998, 64-74). In what typical ways do Thinkers, Relaters and Changers respectively misinterpret Gospel texts?

Thinking misinterpretation

However determinedly personal experience is avoided, the Thinking approach cannot avoid discrepancies in interpretative outcome arising from differences in presupposition. Variation between one individual or group and another in conclusions drawn from the same text is not in itself a drawback. It does, however, raise the question of how the validity of different interpretations may be evaluated.

The interminable nature of historical research works against some obvious choices of marker. The original authors and contexts of the Gospels' formation are still matters of academic debate; however painstakingly historical reconstruction proceeds, these will remain at best a matter of conjecture. Moreover, subsequent readers of the text come from a plethora of cultural and denominational contexts, so no one current interpretative context, demographic or theological, can legitimately be made normative. This absence of common ground and normative criteria can lead to

ambivalence regarding the fruitfulness of historical criticism. As one of my

Changing interviewees commented:

WO: I've never been very pro the academic bit, because I think it's probably been rehashed so often, you're only getting what your last, latest translation says, because if you read different translations they translate them slightly differently anyway.

S: So you've got a healthy scepticism?

WO: I don't believe necessarily, you know, that that is the only translation that there is, and there, you can, there is room for a bit of manoeuvre around what the parables etc. mean... There isn't one interpretation that is THE right one... Maybe if I spoke or read ancient Hebrew or something I'd be able to go to the original and hopefully get a bit closer... But with a lot of it... there was quite a time lapse, and the people that were writing it were writing it from a certain angle... So, you know, it has been [written down], and then somebody's interpreted further down, and then the Victorians have said, Well, they can't say that, it's not sexually right, you know, and have interpreted. And you can't say 'he', you have to [say] 'she' because you can't have God as being a man – You know, where do you stop?

By its nature, Thinking interpretation is not likely to reach assured conclusions. This means that for the non-expert misinterpretations can be hard to distinguish from a plethora of valid interpretations. While Thinkers are stimulated by the open-ended nature of such study, for Relaters and Changers the lack of assured results, to influence character or action respectively, may lead to a loss of confidence in the whole exegetical project.

Relating misinterpretation

While Thinkers' interpretative free-for-all may lead to unintended polysemy, the opposite possibility for misinterpretation is to allow a group member's values to shut down all possibilities for textual meaning bar one. While a particular theological tradition can provide a suitable vehicle for textual appropriation, it can also open a door to misinterpreting the text as given. The generally inhibiting effect upon historical-critical exegesis of a group composed of conservative Relaters has already

been considered. Here a conservative Relater operating within a largely liberal
Relating group gives another example of this tendency, operating within a less
homogeneous group:

Mark 7:24-30 [Overall theme of meeting: dealing with change in life]

Leader: What sort of story is this?

Group: A miracle story. A story about faith, with Gentiles. A conversation between Jesus and the woman. An initial disagreement between them.

Leader: What's the meaning of the code 'children'? [silence, group unsure]

Leader: They're the children of Israel. But they're not currently in Israel, but in Gentile territory. Who might the 'dogs' be?

Group: Gentiles?

Leader: Yes. So why is Jesus saying this?

Group: Is he trying to find out whether the woman's a convert?

Leader: The text says she's a Gentile in a Gentile territory. Is he trying to convert her or testing her? Would she think he was being rude?

Group: No, Jesus wouldn't be rude.

Leader: Wouldn't we think he was rude if it wasn't Jesus? [group silence]

Was he testing her, or did he think Gentiles were worse than Jews and then change his mind afterwards?

Group: No, he wouldn't be prejudiced.

Leader: Can you tell that from the passage?

Group: Would he have gone to that territory if he thought that about Gentiles?

Leader: Could he be so different from all the other Jews?

Group1: The incident at age 12 in the Temple already shows he was critical of Judaism.

[NB this is from a different Gospel, showing the tendency to elide]

Group2: It says Jesus wanted to be incognito – was he trying to avoid contact with people in the territory? Would he want to discourage her because of that?

Leader: He does say, I'm here for the children, not the dogs. Was he having an off-day?

Group: The text before is Jesus speaking against the tradition of the Jewish elders, so he wasn't pro-Jewish.

Leader: Here is the only time Jesus is addressed as 'Lord' in Mark: is this significant? (leader explains different understandings of Lord: 'Sir' versus 'God').

Group: *Jesus must have known already how he would react, since he is God and therefore all-seeing/all-knowing.*

Leader: How does Jesus' omniscience fit in with his humanity?

Group: His humanity is demonstrated more in e.g. Gethsemane, as his miracles, prophecy demonstrate his deity.

Leader: But mightn't humanity imply having to learn? [Group falls silent. Discussion about the context of the passage continues]...

Leader: Whatever Jesus made of this meeting with the Gentile woman, it was important for Mark's church – mixed Jewish/Gentile – to know how to behave with each other now the situation was different for them. The argument is seen

all the way through Acts and Paul's letters, but it's already here: how do they deal with this change?

Earlier in the discussion, the group member here offering a very theological response (italicised) had already indicated a relatively conservative theological orientation by focussing on the literal reality of demons, a position not taken up by the rest of the group. Here, her use of theological language – itself a rarity within the group – shut down debate. In a group knowing each other better, with a more experienced leader or with a more flexible model of study which did not entail a prescribed series of interpretative moves within the evening, it might have been possible to discuss the implications of her theological assertion without causing offence. In this case, however, theological eisegesis – reading meaning into rather than out of the texts – engendered textual misinterpretation: Jesus' omniscience cannot legitimately be argued from this passage.

Theological orientation is not the only example of shared values which can cause interpretative distortion; values arising from demographic characteristics can also play a role in such misinterpretation. Study of the Beatitudes comparing Luke's 'poor' with Matthew's 'poor in spirit' in two middle-class liberal groups, one largely Thinkers and one largely Relaters, produced results consonant with David Sinclair's 1994 doctoral thesis, *The influence of power and class on the biblical interpretation of church members*: to a large extent, class determined reading. My notes record the following discussion among the liberal Relating group:

Texts: Matthew 5:1-12/Luke 6:17-26

Leader: What does it mean, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'?

Group: It is a huge statement – they'll just go straight to heaven. It's very encouraging – that's the best thing you can get out of life, so those who are poor in spirit would find it uplifting as a statement from Jesus.

Leader: Who are the 'poor in spirit'?

Group: Depressed, ill, in poor health.

Leader: Looking at Luke's version, is it the same?

Group: No – 'you who are poor'. That depends what is meant by poor. Poor in spirit?

Leader: Is it the same thing, or does Luke mean people who haven't got much money?

Group: No [in chorus].

Leader: If it's a particular group of people who are poor in spirit – does this apply to someone who's begging or in the Third World?

Group: Not particularly – it is a bigger category including the materially poor as well as the poor in spirit...

Leader: Who is Jesus talking about when he says, Woe to you who are rich?

Group: If people are so rich they never have troubles, they'll get them in the next life!

Leader: But is anyone rich that way? Even the Royal Family have their problems.

Group: No, everyone has problems – it balances out. And these things are relative. Something that would be terrible for me may not be for someone else and vice versa.

Leader: But who are the rich if no one misses out completely on misfortune?

Group: Those who are rich in material possessions? See Jesus talking about the camel and the eye of a needle.

Leader: Again, Luke blesses those who hunger, and Matthew those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. So the hunger is spiritual hunger? [Excursus on the difficulty of these questions, the impossibility of definite answers]...

But Luke blesses the hungry: is that people who've not eaten, or people who are hungry for God?

Group: It could be either.

Leader: Are we talking about material poverty, material hunger? Or spiritual?

It makes more sense if it's the same interpretation in this whole discussion.

Group: Maybe Matthew's community is less spiritually aware than Luke's so they needed it spelled out for them? Was Luke a lawyer?

Leader: No, traditionally a doctor.

[Question of actual authorship of Gospels let drop]

Group: Were the two churches really different? The audience described in both was very mixed.

Leader: But why are there the differences?

Group: Matthew makes it clearer. Is Luke later than Matthew?

Leader: It's generally thought so.

Group: So then maybe Matthew's community is less spiritually developed than Luke's because it was earlier – Luke's didn't need the implications [i.e. 'this means spiritual'] spelled out.

This group came to the somewhat illogical conclusion that 'the poor' are spiritually

so, and might include themselves, but 'the rich' are materially so and do not include

themselves. This reaction, added to that of the liberal Thinker discussed above

(see Chapter 8), indicates that social class can be a stronger factor than the distinction

I have more generally made between the appropriative modes of Thinkers and Relaters. It also shows how, given a desired conclusion, every argument in favour of it – whether historical-critical or theological – may be used in order to win the day. The accusation of allowing foregone conclusions to determine one's argument is frequently used against liberationist interpretation, but evidently cuts both ways. Regrettably academic interpreters, possessing their own unexamined values, are no more immune from this mode of misinterpretation than anyone else.

Changing misinterpretation

Narrowing down the possibilities of misinterpreting a text, from coming to an infinity of conclusions, through the value filters of theology and social class, the possibility of an overt agenda of personal experience operating to engender textual misinterpretation must also be considered:

A personal agenda is that which a person knowingly or unknowingly brings to a group from his/her recent or past life outside the group, and which to a greater or lesser degree gets in the way of what the group as a whole is supposed to be doing... If there seem to be particular personal agendas which are affecting the life of the group, there should be some encouragement from the leader for these to be acknowledged and discussed so that their effect on the group is minimised (Kindred 1987, 32).

Such unwished-for personal contributions are hard to counter without pastoral insensitivity; one of my ministerial interviewees (see Chapter 7) spoke feelingly of the difficulties an *idée fixe* of this nature could cause.

There is a possibility, through careful facilitation, for such engrained habits of thought – against which Gadamer has warned (see Chapter 9) – to be exposed and discussed within the group. This may, however, be obstructed by the necessity in such a case for group members to be able to share both experiences and ideas.

Thinkers, equipped to analyse and detect the weaknesses in others' arguments, may hesitate to share those experiences which would reveal the cause of their own assertions. Relaters, tender of one another's feelings, may not wish to take issue with someone else's values. The Changing stress on personal experience may be most liable to evince this form of misinterpretation. However, a long-term group of Changers, while respectful of each other's experience, may also have the analytical and relational skills to challenge such an agenda.

Is (mis)understanding possible?

From a reader-response point of view, it could be argued that any interpretation produced by a local-church study group within its own context is a correct one.

The semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco, however, is an unexpected opponent of this view, instancing an extreme case of textual misinterpretation:

[I]f Jack the Ripper told us that he did what he did on the grounds of his interpretation of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, I suspect that many reader-orientated critics would be inclined to think that he read Saint Luke in a pretty preposterous way. Non-reader-orientated critics would say that Jack the Ripper was deadly mad...[E]ven such a paradoxical argument must be taken seriously. It proves that there is at least one case in which it is possible to say that a given interpretation is a bad one. In terms of Popper's theory of scientific research, this is enough to disprove the hypothesis that interpretation has no public criteria (at least statistically speaking) (Eco 1992, 24).

Eco argues from this that what he calls the 'intention of the text' (*intentio operis*), as opposed to that of the author or of the reader, is in fact the guiding principle of interpretation. Given the range of textual appropriation modes discerned within my fieldwork, in which only the text is a constant factor, the idea of the text itself being a criterion of valid interpretation is an attractive one. How might this function?

As Schneiders asks:

Is there anything in the text that grounds and governs interpretation, toward which valid interpretation is oriented, and that is commonly available to all interpreters of the same text and can thus ground at least a family resemblance among diverse valid interpretations? (Schneiders 1999, 145).

In her reply, Schneiders points to Ricoeur's 'ideal meaning' of the text (see Chapter 3) – a dialectic between the text's multiple layers of sense and reference.

Though, as she admits, 'It is, of course, easier to posit the existence of ideal meaning than to establish it in relation to any particular text' (Schneiders 1999, 146), with Ricoeur she argues that the boundaries to what a text may legitimately mean are themselves textual. Though the 'ideal meaning' of a text is very broad, its boundaries are dependant on a close study of both sense and reference, established by the use of historical-critical methods. Moreover, 'better' or 'worse' interpretations may be evaluated by going back to the text.

Such a process is, however, only possible with the motivation of a stable group, which may not always be in evidence. Indeed, the exasperated group leader may sympathise with Williams' negative note at one point, a *cri de coeur* at odds with the book's generally positive approach:

I used to think that if people feel a need to learn something, they will be motivated to learn it. But I'm not so sure any more. I tend to think that, although that is true, there is another level of needs that people have, and at that level, their needs can be obstructive. People have more ingrained needs, such as vanity, insecurity, competitiveness, which work against their motivation to learn (Baldwin and Williams 1988, 123).

In Christian language, this observation describes the sinful attitudes blocking our possibilities of transformation. Interestingly, for a secular publication, Baldwin also suggests a solution when people refuse to learn, which might be paralleled with both undeserved divine grace and the Christian habitus of forgiveness:

I think one of the big factors in engaging people and getting them to want to change, is the demonstration that everybody is valued. However resistant, unpleasant, challenging and hostile they may be! (Baldwin and Williams 1988, 139)

Such a habitus-related solution is, for Fowl, also a necessary factor in biblical interpretation within a local church community:

[T]he recognition of sinfulness must lead one into the practices of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation. Unless these practices are in good working order, the recognition of our sin will be the first and last words on our lives. In such a situation, simply carrying on the same interpretative practices and habits will not help (Fowl 1998, 96).

In such a scenario the Relating virtue of relationship and the Changing value placed on welcoming variety can join the Thinking ability to analyse what is in need of forgiveness. In this way, some of the worst pitfalls of community hermeneutics – and, indeed, of academic biblical interpretation – may be avoided.

Appendix II: Study procedure

Choice of theme

The initial session was used for the group to decide on a theme of study (a meeting absent from Groups 4 and 8). Questions relating to hopes and fears, or issues of immediate relevance in the life of group members, were brainstormed, first in small groups and then in plenary. Once a range of possible questions had been suggested, links between them were sought and consensus on an overall theme, with subheadings for each week in groups where the cycle was worked through every time, was established. In one group (Group 9) no consensus could be established, and a vote was taken.

Themes chosen varied widely: powerlessness, dealing with change, the Five Marks of Mission (for the two groups which did not choose their own theme), unity, diversity and ageism. Two groups found difficulty in choosing a single overarching theme and varied the focus from session to session.

Newspaper parallels

In order to introduce historical-critical methods of studying the Gospels to people for whom textual analysis was new, two techniques were employed, both focussing on newspapers as analogous to the biblical texts.

Source/redaction criticism

Three newspapers of that day were purchased; one tabloid and two broadsheets from different social perspectives (for example left-wing/right-wing or Scottish/English).

The front page of each was displayed with identifying marks removed, and participants were invited to identify each, giving reasons for identification in terms of political slant, style and vocabulary. On only one occasion did all three papers carry the same major front-page story – a sporting event. Once the papers were identified, one story appearing in all three papers was compared for differences in editorial presentation, and a story unique to each paper was analysed for the clues it gave about its expected target audience. Parallels were then drawn with questions of source and redaction criticism as applied to the Gospels; the passages studied that evening would come from two Gospel parallels.

Form criticism

Again, three newspapers were purchased, one tabloid and two broadsheets. In this exercise the object was to demonstrate the participants' knowledge of genre as applied to newspapers. Pairs of cuttings were compared:

- A death notice and an obituary
- A problem page letter and a letter to the editor
- A political cartoon and a 'funny'
- A list of stocks and shares and a list of races
- An overt advertisement and an oblique one relying on cultural knowledge
- A crossword and a weather map, each with legend removed

Participants were asked to explain how these pairs were similar and how they differed; thereby demonstrating their knowledge of genre conventions as applied to newspapers. The leader pointed out that mistaking one for the other would seriously damage the interpreter's chances of understanding the text concerned. Links were made with the different forms to be found in the Gospels (controversy, miracle and so on). The passage studied that evening would be interpreted in terms of its genre

and context rather than with parallels. The process took about 10 minutes in two separate sessions (for source/redaction and form criticism respectively). Comments in feedback (see especially the unsolicited experimentation on an interviewee's family described in Chapter 5) showed that the analogy between papers and Gospels was generally found to be helpful.

Choice of texts

This was made by the leader, and determined by two factors, other than that Gospel passages were the focus of my research: the theme chosen by the group, and the aspect of historical-critical method – comparing parallels, literary context or Old Testament context – to be introduced during the session. Like the other group leader, at times I found my knowledge of the Gospels taxed by these two requirements, but the task became easier with practice.

Timing and practicalities

Study-group sessions lasted approximately 90 or 120 minutes. The starting time was frequently affected by latecomers, but meetings always ended on time. The two pilot groups (1 and 8) ran for four weekly sessions, the two subsequent Lent groups (4 and 5) for five sessions, and the remaining groups for six sessions. The cycle of community hermeneutics (see Chapter 3) was worked through during each session, except in 6 and 9 where a whole session was given over to each step in turn.

After this, for groups where the cycle was worked through every time, each meeting was broken down into the following approximate timings, here given for the more common 90-minute meeting:

- 10 minutes welcome and recap of previous week (plus worship song in one group); this allowed tea/coffee and biscuits to be shared and absorbed delay from latecomers
- 20 minutes discussion of experience on the chosen theme
- 10 minutes newspaper work (see below) in first two sessions – for the subsequent weeks, this time was used for discussion of the texts
- 5 minutes silent individual reading of the Gospel text(s) given
- 15 minutes small-group discussion of the text focussing on parallels/context/OT links (depending on week)
- 15 minutes plenary on connections between experience and text
- 15 minutes plenary on possible action arising from discussion (in practice groups generally used this to make more connections rather than in the discussion of action)

The whole discussion was documented as it took place by the leader writing flipchart notes, so that participants could correct inadequate representations of what they had said; these also acted as a backup in case of tape recorder malfunction.

In the last two groups (6 and 9), each session was given over to one step in the cycle of community hermeneutics. In the first of these, responsibility for leading and scribing was also devolved, with mixed results (see Chapters 7, 8 for description and analysis). In the second, I retained the functions of leadership and scribing, with more coherent results.

Appendix III: data analysis

Demographic factors involved

In order to guarantee the confidentiality of group meetings and interviews, members of the study groups observed in my fieldwork have been accorded anonymity by random assignment of initials. As described in Chapter 4, within the constraints of the denominational and geographical context in which my research was carried out, they were self-selected by their interest in Bible study. However, as Tables A and B show, their demographic characteristics were not atypical of Reformed church membership in Scotland more generally. All were Caucasian.

Table A: Demographic details of individual group members interviewed

Individual (gp)	Gender	Age	Education	Church status
AN (3)	F	Retired	Degree	Elder
AR (2)	F	Retired	Other	Elder
AS (6)	F	Retired	Degree	Lay
AT (3)	F	Over 40	Degree	Elder
AW (2)	F	Over 40	Other	Elder
DA (7)	F	Under 40	Degree	Lay
DB (7)	M	Over 40	Other	Lay
DS (3)	F	Over 40	Other	Elder
DT (3)	F	Over 40	Other	Lay
DW (7)	M	Over 40	Degree	Lay
EB (6)	F	Retired	Other	Lay
EP (4)	F	Retired	Other	Lay
EW (5)	F	Over 40	Degree	Elder
GT (0)	M	Over 40	Theology	Cleric
GW (0)	M	Over 40	Theology	Cleric

Individual (gp)	Gender	Age	Education	Church status
HG (8)	M	Over 40	Theology	Cleric
HL (1)	F	Over 40	Degree	Elder
HS (3)	F	Over 40	Other	Lay
HT (2)	F	Retired	Other	Lay
IG (7)	F	Over 40	Other	Lay
IJ (3)	F	Over 40	Other	Elder
NC (1)	F	Under 40	Theology	Lay
ND (8)	F	Over 40	Theology	Cleric
NG (4)	F	Retired	Degree	Lay
NI (1)	M	Under 40	Degree	Lay
NT (0)	F	Over 40	Theology	Cleric
OD (5)	M	Retired	Degree	Lay
RD (5)	M	Over 40	Other	Lay
SF (8)	F	Over 40	Theology	Elder
SG (7)	F	Over 40	Degree	Lay
SI (4)	F	Over 40	Other	Lay
SN (6)	F	Over 40	Other	Lay
ST (6)	F	Over 40	Degree	Lay
SW (2)	M	Retired	Other	Elder
TC (0)	M	Over 40	Theology	Cleric
TH (6)	M	Over 40	Degree	Lay
TI (4)	M	Over 40	Degree	Lay
TT (0)	M	Over 40	Theology	Cleric
VT (1)	M	Retired	Theology	Cleric
WA (2)	M	Over 40	Other	Elder
WI (8)	F	Over 40	Degree	Elder
WO (4)	F	Under 40	Degree	Lay
WR (6)	M	Retired	Degree	Lay
WT (8)	F	Over 40	Degree	Elder

Clergy interviewed outside study groups are given group appellation 0. Members of group 9, who were not interviewed, are not included in this breakdown.

Table B: Demographic analysis of groups observed

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Denom.	URC	URC	C of S	Ecum.	Ecum.	C of S	C of S	URC/ C of S	URC
Class	Middle	Working	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Mixed
Theol.	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Conserv.	Liberal	Mixed
Gender	2M 2F	2M 3F	0M 6F	1M 4F	3M 2F	2M 4F	2M 3F	1M 3F	4M 2F
Age	2 < 40 1 > 40 1 retd	0 < 40 2 > 40 3 retd	0 < 40 4 > 40 2 retd	0 < 40 2 > 40 3 retd	0 < 40 3 > 40 2 retd	0 < 40 3 > 40 3 retd	0 < 40 5 > 40 0 retd	0 < 40 4 > 40 0 retd	3 < 40 3 > 40 0 retd
Educ.	2 theol 2 degree 0 other	0 theol 0 degree 5 other	0 theol 2 degree 4 other	0 theol 2 degree 3 other	1 theol 2 degree 2 other	0 theol 4 degree 2 other	0 theol 4 degree 1 other	3 theol 1 degree 0 other	6 theol 0 degree 0 other
Status	1 cleric 0 elders 3 lay	0 clerics 4 elders 1 lay	0 clerics 4 elders 2 lay	0 clerics 0 elders 5 lay	1 cleric 2 elders 2 lay	0 clerics 0 elders 6 lay	0 clerics 0 elders 6 lay	2 clerics 2 elders 0 lay	6 clerics 0 elders 0 lay

Choice of appropriative mode

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 describe ‘pure’ forms of Thinking, Relating and Changing appropriation of the biblical texts. However, it was quite unusual for my interviewees to use the same mode of appropriation through all the stages of community hermeneutics. Two factors seemed to influence choice of mode: innate personal preference and the particular hermeneutical stage concerned (for a reminder of these stages see Figure 5 in Chapter 4). Discussion of experience is helped by a Relating mode, textual study by a Thinking style, consideration of possible action by a Changing approach. Thus, as Tables C and D demonstrate, versatile interpreters can switch mode according to its current usefulness.

Table C: Breakdown of citation usage by interviewee

CODE	T	R	C
AN	2	10	1
AR	4	13	1
AS	0	0	11
AT	3	8	0
AW	2	2	0
DA	0	4	0
DB	0	12	0
DS	1	3	0
DT	1	5	1
DW	0	10	0
EB	1	1	7
EG	6	4	5
EW	2	0	1
GT	8	3	0
GW	1	0	2
HG	6	0	0
HL	0	3	1
HS	1	0	0
HT	0	2	0
IG	0	10	0
IJ	0	5	1
NC	7	0	1

CODE	T	R	C
ND	4	1	0
NG	14	6	1
NI	11	0	0
NT	3	0	0
OD	4	0	0
RD	1	1	0
SF	2	0	0
SG	0	13	0
SI	0	5	0
SN	0	0	11
ST	3	0	4
SW	5	0	0
TC	3	3	2
TH	4	0	9
TI	3	1	0
TT	4	1	7
VT	1	4	0
WA	0	4	0
WI	9	1	0
WO	3	2	2
WR	2	0	7

The numbers in each column denote the number of text units (each approximately one sentence long) of each interview adjudged to demonstrate Thinking, Relating or Changing characteristics respectively in the interviewee concerned.

Table D: Breakdown of appropriative mode chosen by interpretative move

(for explanation of headings see also Fig. 5 in Chapter 4)

CODE	W.VIEW	GROUP	STUDY	CONNEC.	HIST.	EXPERI.	APPR.	OVERALL
AN	R	R	T	T	T	C/T	T	R
AR	C	R	R	T	C	0	R	C
AS	C	R	C	R	R	C	C	R
AT	R	R	R	T	T	T	R	R
AW	T	T	R	0	0	0	R	T
DA	R	T	T	R	R	C	T	R
DB	R	C	T	R	R	R	T	R
DS	R	R	T	R	R	0	T	R
DT	C	R	R	C	C	R	R	R
DW	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
EB	C	C	C	T	T	R	C	C
EG	C	T	T	T	T	C/T	T	T
EW	0	C	T	C/T	C/T	0	T	T
GT	C/R	T	T	T	T	R	T	T
GW	C	R	C	C	C	C	C	C
HG	T	T	T	0	0	0	T	T
HL	R	R	R	C	C	0	C/R	R
HS	R	R	T	0	0	0	T	T
HT	R	R	T	T	R	0	T	R
IG	R	R	R	R	R	C	R	R
IJ	C	R	R	T	T	C	R	C
NC	C	T	T	0	0	0	C	T
ND	T	R	T	0	0	0	C	R
NG	T	R	T	T	T	T/R	T	T
NI	R	C	T	T/R	T/R	0	T	T
NT	T	C/R	T	T	T	0	C/T	T
OD	T	T	T	T	T	0	T	T
RD	C/R	R	R	R	R	0	R	R
SF	C	C	T	T	C	0	T	T
SG	R	R	R	R	R	0	R	R

CODE	W.VIEW	GROUP	STUDY	CONNEC.	HIST.	EXPERL.	APPR.	OVERALL
SI	R	R	R	R	0	R	R	R
SN	C	C	C	T	T	C	C	C
ST	C	C	T	R	R	0	C/T	T
SW	C	T	R	T	T	0	R	T
TC	R	R	C	C	T	C	C	C
TH	T	R	T	C	0	C	T	T
TI	T	C	R	T	T	C/T	C	C
TT	C	R	T	T	C/T	0	T	T
VT	R	C	R	T	0	0	R	T
WA	R	R	T	R	R	R	T	R
WI	T	C	T	0	0	0	T	T
WO	C	R	R	T	T	0	R	C
WR	C	R	R	T	T	T/R	R	T

The label 0 is used where the interview contained no material concerning the relevant interpretative move.

Appendix IV

Meditative approaches

In my study, I found that some Thinkers cautiously used a meditative engagement with the texts as a balance to their normally cerebral way of appropriating them:

OD: K, she's connected with the chaplaincy on the Church of Scotland side, I think, the university chaplaincy, and she was a guide to us to start with, and she did the upper room where Doubting Thomas was, and she was so much into this that she was crying, in fact, because she felt that she was guilty of doing things, she was there and it was public... so ever since then... I found it difficult at first to get in, I can get into it more easily now – a bit more easily, I'm not saying it's easy – because I found that very useful, that you had to read... probably because I'm more scientific and mathematically involved in my life and practical things. But I found that very useful.

This is less unfamiliar territory for Relaters, whose emphasis on relationships within the group naturally leads on to consideration of their current relationship with God:

DA: Sometimes you read [a passage], and you think, you must believe that you've been guided to that passage at the time of your life or when you're living through an experience... There is that cliché about the Bible falling open at a relevant page. That, that I have experienced... a passage that has been exactly what I needed to read at the time.

Changers, too, can find the texts a resource for meditatively exploring those difficult areas of life which may not give rise to orthodox faith responses:

SN: I certainly remember a particular time... I was going through a particular struggle with God at the time, and I was aware that I was angry, but I was having difficulty expressing that anger, and it was the story about Jesus being asleep in the boat... And I put myself into the story... and Jesus actually being asleep in the boat really triggered my anger off! [laughs]... How dare you be asleep in the boat when we need you to calm the storm, or whatever it was! [laughs]... And actually that was very helpful for me, because it kind of got me over the block of being able to engage with God on that level and so for me... the Scripture became a very active agent... kind of moving me forward in my dialogue with God.

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